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RECLAIMING “VICTIM” THROUGH UNTOLD STORIES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERSONAL STORIES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE SURVIVED VIOLENCE

by

Ashley K. Collette

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ABSTRACT
RECLAIMING "VICTIM" THROUGH UNTOLD STORIES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERSONAL STORIES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE SURVIVED VIOLENCE

Ashley K. Collette

Marquette University, 2012

Around the world one in every three women has been the victim of gender-based violence (Amnesty International USA, 2012). Be it sexual, physical, or psychological, violence against women is an epidemic that needs to end. Past research in the field of Communication has mainly focused on news media coverage of violent crimes. The accounts portrayed in news media were largely edited and focused on a hegemonic version of the experiences (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Carll, 2003; Dowler, 2006). These news accounts generally ignore the lived experiences of the female victims, which leaves them feeling isolated in their victimization. Victims' stories have also been largely left out of past research (outside of fields that work with victims such as Nursing and Social Work), yet understanding their experiences is critical to being able to battle violence against women.

This study hopes to illuminate the realities of the lived experiences of victims, based on their own accounts. To do this the personal published stories of the victims of VAW were examined using fantasy theme analysis. Scene, dramatis personae, and action themes were categorized and compared between 22 published narratives written or told by victims of VAW.

After the final categories were determined, an overarching narrative emerged from the victims' stories, which reflects the lived experiences from victimization to recovery. The overarching story is told in three parts. The first part of the narrative tells of the victimization the women experienced. This includes how the victims made sense of the violence. The second part details how the victims came to the realization that the violence they suffered was not their fault. And the third part chronicles how the victims came to terms with their experiences, modified their behaviors, and were victims no more. By sharing their stories these victims helped to expand the knowledge base and understanding of the realities and lived experiences of victims of violence against women. All of these victims were able to get out, start their lives over, and share their stories publicly. This made them not only survivors, but heroes.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a serious social issue plaguing our country and our world, one that continues to ruin the lives of innocent people every day. The issue is violence against women. Be it sexual, physical, or psychological violence, it is an epidemic that needs to end.

> Around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women. Gender-based violence kills and disables as many women between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer, and its toll on women's health surpasses that of traffic accidents and malaria combined. Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends. (Amnesty International USA, 2012, para. 1)

This particular topic is of interest as I have personally been the victim of violence against women. This thesis is guided by the notion that the role of the researcher is fundamental to the process. Henwood and Pidgeon (1995) affirm that “revealing the personal in research then becomes a part of explicating the bases for knowledge” (p. 9). With this in mind, my own experiences and social location become a vital part of the standpoint from which I research and write. By bringing my standpoint to light (as opposed to keeping my experience as a victim hidden), I am helping to debunk “the myth of total objectivity in scientific research” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995, p. 11). As a victim myself I bring my own experiences of oppression to the research. It is important to note however, that my personal story is not a part of the study. In this thesis I am giving voice

to victims whose voices have largely been left out of the public discourse on this topic, and yet are vital to achieving a broader and more realistic understanding of violence against women as a social issue.

Violence against women is a topic of discussion among local, as well as international organizations (e.g., V-Day, RAINN, Feminist.com, Family Violence Prevention Fund, Department of Justice, Amnesty International, World Health Organization, the United Nations), all of whom are enacting campaigns to fight and put an end to that violence. As noted in the above quote, one in three women worldwide is a victim of some sort of gender-based violence, and that number appears to be rising as more cases of violence and genocide are discovered and/or reported (Feminist.com, 2012). The organization known as RAINN (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network) specifically deals with sexual violence—and their statistics are staggering: one in six women, in America alone, will be a victim of sexual assault in her lifetime (RAINN, 2009), and the numbers are even larger for societies outside of Western and industrialized nations (Mehta, & Gopalakrishnan, 2007; Redhead, 2007; Garg, 2001; Nair, 2001). In fact, in Bangladesh nearly 70% of women have been victims of gender-based violence (Mehta, & Gopalakrishnan, 2007). Though the statistics are astounding they "cannot adequately relate the cost of this violence—in terms of misery, physical and emotional pain, disfigurement, and family dysfunction, not to mention the economic costs of medical care and lost labor" (Meyers, p. 5). The severity and gravity of this horrifying reality is spurring many of the aforementioned organizations to strive to end violence against women across the globe. Many use media to raise awareness. Ironically, media are not always accurate in their portrayals of violence against women and its victims.

Entertainment media portray gender-based victimization as normal, while news media decontextualize the matter by failing to accurately convey the victim's story from her own perspective. While negative and unrealistic portrayals are the current status quo, the news media do have the opportunity to play an educational and problem-solving role by raising awareness and knowledge on the issue. As media permeate our every moment and experience, our understandings of those situations and experiences as well as how we fit ourselves within them are irrefutably changed. Media have become one of our main sources for making sense of the world around us. The images and narratives portrayed are the public's main source of understanding social issues that plague society.

Past research focuses on news media coverage of violent crimes and shows that the accounts portrayed in news media are largely edited and focus on a hegemonic version of the experiences (i.e., the victim is white, a virgin, and has been attacked by a sick, psycho, and evil man, who is not white and a stranger to the victim) (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Carll, 2003; Dowler, 2006). These news accounts generally ignore the personal stories and experiences of the female victims. Victims' stories have also been largely left out of past research (outside of fields that work with victims such as Nursing and Social Work), yet understanding their experiences is critical to being able to battle violence against women. Recognizing the individual victim's experience not only validates it, it increases awareness of the impact of such violence and the need for social change. Sleutel (1998) explains,

> While statistics and numbers detail the extent or significance of the problem, nothing galvanizes the reader to action like a harrowing first person account of a life filled with violence and terror. Using the knowledge uncovered by women's narratives, providers and researchers can devise realistic strategies for identifying, intervening, and preventing domestic violence. (p. 537)

This thesis examines the stories victims of violence against women tell about their personal experiences. More specifically, I ask:

> **RQ 1:** What stories do victims of violence against women (VAW) tell about their experience and how they see themselves?

The goal is to better understand not only the personal impact violence has on its victims, but to also understand violence against women as a social issue. This study is important because we cannot adequately solve the pandemic of violence against women without understanding the reality of what is taking place and the experiences of violence from the perspective of those who have lived through it. Furthermore, the personal published stories of victims of violence against women have been underinvestigated in scholarly research. In fact, in researching this topic I have not come across a single study that examined personal published narratives of victims of violence against women. In order to raise awareness and help both the current and future victims of violence against women a greater knowledge needs to be generated on the realities of this epidemic.

Before discussing the academic research on the lived experiences of victims of violence against women a discussion of terms is necessary. The phrase *violence against women* is used in a variety of contexts in media and can have a plethora of meanings. The United Nations General Assembly has defined violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). There are also several other terms used concurrently with violence against women. *Sexist violence,* has been used by Suzanne Pharr (1991),

who argues, “we see that it has societal roots, and is not just any violence or hatred that occurs” (p. 2). Meyers (1997) goes on to explain the importance and meaning behind the term sexist violence:

> The term *sexist violence* underscores the institutional and social nature of this violence, placing it within the context of misogyny, patriarchy, and male supremacy. It acknowledges that the violence is, in fact, sexist, that it assumes women are subordinate to men and acts on that assumption. The term *anti-women violence* also appropriately places violence against women within a social context of patriarchy and male supremacy. (pp. 7-8)

While the three terms *sexist violence, violence against women,* and *anti-women violence* all refer to the same issue, and are all commonly used in scholarly research, this study will use the term violence against women as defined by the United Nations as it seems to be more widely used and all encompassing. That said, I will also remain mindful of the nuances outlined by Pharr and Meyers.

Drawing on Meyers (1997), I define women as “all females, regardless of age” (p. 7). The term “victims” refers to all female sufferers of such violent, gender-based crimes. The term “victim” is used because it is more encompassing of every woman who is affected by violence against women. It bears noting that there is a negative stigma attached to the label “victim” and it is often related to a sense of powerlessness or lack of agency. By using “victim” I hope to change the way the term is both understood and used. A victim is not a type of person, or someone who is powerless. The word victim is an encompassing term, and is solely connected to women’s lived experiences. Though survivor is commonly used as a more affirmative term, it fails to include every woman who has been a “victim” of violence against women. I now turn to a discussion of academic research on violence against women, the experiences of those who have lived through it, and the way media have portrayed violence against women and its victims.

Current Knowledge on Violence Against Women

Research on violence against women comes from two major disciplines. The first is fields that work with victims of violence against women (e.g., Social Work, Nursing). This research focuses on the clinical perspective, but is the main source of academic knowledge on the lived experiences of victims of violence against women. The other is the public knowledge of the social issue, specifically the mediated images and narratives that make up the public discourse on violence against women (e.g., Mass Communication). I will begin with current knowledge about victims and their lived experiences.

Lived Experience

The two most prevalent types of violence against women experienced by victims are intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault. I will start by laying out current knowledge about the lived experiences of victims of IPV, then will discuss the much less researched lived experiences of victims of rape and sexual assault.

Most research on lived experiences of victims of violence against women comes from a clinical standpoint and focuses on the experiences of women getting out of an abusive intimate relationship (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Wood, 2001; Häggblom & Möller, 2007; Brosi & Rolling, 2010; Enander, 2010). According to researchers, “violent relationships are not atypical” (Wood, 2001, p. 240). In fact, such relationships are so common that they are considered “normal” (Wood, 2001, p. 240). Research also shows that both perpetrators and victims of violence in intimate relationships are not abnormal. In fact, the only similarity among victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) is that there is no underlying similarity. There are a multitude of factors that play a part in IPV.

Scholars point to cultural factors, identity issues, the complexity of relationships, as well as the manipulation and control of the abuser as leading to the prevalence and perseverance of male violence in intimate relationships (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Wood, 2001; Häggblom & Möller, 2007; Enander, 2010).

Patriarchy, male-dominated culture, and the socialization of women to feel the need to preserve a relationship at their own personal expense are three of the most noted cultural factors affecting the pervasiveness of IPV (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Wood, 2001; Brosi & Rolling, 2010). "The patriarchal ordering of society assigns a secondary status to women, and provides men with ultimate authority, both within and outside the family unit" (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, p. 326). Walker (1979) contends that a patriarchal society does not allow for equal power for men and women, especially within marriage. Ferraro and Johnson (1983) add that the socialization of women to view their role as wife and mother as primary to their identity aids in their victimization. This is because a woman may be more willing to risk her personal safety if it means she is being perceived as a good wife and/or mother. Brosi and Rolling (2010) assert three prevailing cultural narratives that play a role in battered women leaving their abusive partners. These are "attitudes toward the acceptability of divorce, the woman's role as the helper (e.g., 'needing' a man in their lives), and the avoidance of conflict" (p. 242). Victims learn these cultural narratives, as well as their own social identities through socialization and their perception regarding what constitute role model relationships.

Role model relationships. We learn how to define ourselves through socialization. Individual identities are developed through the signs, symbols, and behaviors learned from parents, teachers, and peers. We watch and emulate the people

around us, especially those we look up to, such as our parents (Witt, 1997). We learn who we are and the roles we are expected to play through socialization. Victims of violence against women are no different, in that they also learn who they are and how to act based on emulating those around them. I am calling these relationships, which inform the victims, role model relationships because they are the relationships the women used as models for their own.

Victims grew up looking to their parents, teachers, and peers for lessons on how to interact with others. The relationships and behaviors they witnessed in these role model relationships inform the way they see themselves and understand their roles in this world. Growing up in a violent household can make those behaviors seem normal, which leads to an increased "likelihood of children exposed to violence in the family of origin becoming both offenders and victims of intimate partner violence as adults" (Kerley, Xu, Sirisunyaluck, & Alley, 2010, p. 338). In fact, this "relationship between childhood exposure to intimate partner violence and adult offending or victimization in the family context is one of the most established relationships in the empirical literature" (Kerley, Xu, Sirisunyaluck, & Alley, 2010, p. 338). Children look up to their parents as role models of how to behave; this is particularly the case for heterosexual children who look to their same gendered parent for sex role cues (Witt, 1997). "Children exposed directly (e.g., experience of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse) or indirectly (e.g., witnessing or hearing a parent or relative being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused) to violence in the family of origin may develop norms about the suitability of violence to address specific circumstances" (Kerley, Xu, Sirisunyaluck, & Alley, 2010, p. 338). Though there is little doubt that growing up in a violent home may make a woman more accepting of

violence in her own relationship in Walker's (1979) study not all, or even most, victims grow up in violent households.

One of the only researchers to discuss victims who grow up in nonviolent homes is Walker (1979), who discusses her research on how role model relationships can relate to later violence in an intimate relationship:

> I was curious to learn whether or not the women who lived in battering relationships with their husbands had also lived in battering relationships with their parents. Although this was true in a small number of cases, many more women reported that their first exposure to violent men was their husbands. Their fathers were described as traditionalists who treated their daughters like fragile dolls. The daughters were expected to be pretty and ladylike and to grow up to marry nice young men who would care for them as their fathers had. Doted upon as little girls, these women, in their fathers' eyes, could do no wrong. Such pampering and sex-role stereotyping unfortunately taught them that they were incompetent to take care of themselves and had to be dependent on men. (p. 35)

This dependency on men speaks to the victim's understanding of herself and her role as a woman, wife, girlfriend, and/or mother. By linking her self-worth to her ability to keep her man happy she takes responsibility for his violence and abuse against her. Similarly, Lichter & McCloskey (2004) found that "possessing traditional gender attitudes…was associated with higher levels of dating violence perpetration and victimization" (p. 352).

There is no common link among victims that will allow researchers to give a list of reasons to why a woman has been abused. A victim may have grown up in an abusive household and began to see violence as normal in relationships. While another may have grown up in a loving household in which she never experienced or witnessed violent behavior. A third may have grown up in a mix of the two households. Adding to the complexity of deciphering her identity is the difficulty of labeling her experiences as violent or abusive (Häggblom & Möller, 2007) and herself as a battered woman (Walker, 1979).

Not labeling experience as abuse. A common theme of IPV is that the perpetrator is not violent all, or even most, of the time (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Sleutel, 1998). This is particularly the case early in the relationship (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). "Feelings of guilt and shame are also mixed with a hope that things will get better, at least in the early stages of battering. Even the most violent man is nonviolent much of the time, so there is always a basis for believing that violence is exceptional and the 'real man' is not a threat" (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, p. 334). Enander (2010) discusses how the perpetrator of IPV uses this to maintain his control: "the abuser achieves and maintains control not only by threats and physical coercion but also by simultaneously displaying warmth, affection, and regret. This may make the victim feel manipulated and fooled, but may also draw her into a complex emotional web or create a traumatic bonding to the abuser" (Enander, 2010, p. 18). This is one reason not all women label their victimization within a relationship as IPV (Enander, 2010). Even years after a woman is out of an abusive relationship she may have a hard time calling her actual experience abuse or battering. One woman interviewed for Häggblom and Möller's (2007) study had almost been killed by her husband, yet "she explained: 'It was not real violence against women that I experienced…it was self-caused when I couldn't get away, I should have had the strength…but I thought it could be better, I still had hope,'" (p. 172). According to Häggblom and Möller (2007) there are many reasons attributing to the inability to label one's experiences as violence against women or IPV. They credit the intense psychological abuse the male partner inflicts on his victim for much of the woman's confusion over what is happening to her. They found that battered women may repress their feelings of innocence during their abuse due to brainwashing,

psychological control, and manipulation by the perpetrator. One women they interviewed "described how she had felt her identity being totally manipulated by her partner: 'It took five years (after the separation) before I could think my own thoughts without thinking what he would say if I did this or that…'" (Häggblom & Möller, 2007, p. 172). By admitting to the violence within their intimate relationship, battered women are faced with the realities of their abuse and are forced to examine the illusions they used to protect themselves. With the loss of their core relationship, the battered women who leave their abusive partners oftentimes describe "their experiences as sorrow over a lost love and family happiness" (Häggblom & Möller, 2007, p. 172). One woman describes losing her dreams of family happiness in admitting to the abuse and ending the relationship. These feelings of sadness and loss may overshadow the victimization she experienced during the relationship.

Normalization and desensitization. Another complicating experience of IPV, in addition to psychological abuse and manipulation, is desensitization. Because of the insidiousness of the violence victims experience throughout their relationships, they become less and less affected by individual acts. There is a normalization process that the female victims go through in attempting to make sense of their abuse. Oftentimes "the woman identifies with the aggressor, adapts to his view of her and internalizes the violence" (Häggblom & Möller, 2007, p. 170). The victim finds fault in herself in order to justify and normalize the abuse from her partner.

Turning point. The woman's recognition of her abuse is integral for the change seeking process to occur (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). A battered woman will seek ending an abusive relationship when she sees no other viable options, and believes there is "no hope

of restoring a positive relationship, is unable to predict what will happen, or can no longer hide the abuse" (Brosi & Rolling, 2010, p. 241). Oftentimes a significant event can create dissonance within the woman's beliefs about herself and/or her relationship to the point of shifting her perception. Brosi and Rolling (2010) call these significant events turning points. They do not always lead to the battered woman leaving her partner, but they do mark a point along a path to leaving (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). In Brosi and Rolling's (2010) study on narrative therapy for victims of intimate partner violence they found that turning points ultimately represent "significant unique outcomes which aided not only in leaving their abuser but in the creation of a new narrative" (p. 242). Basically, turning points aid victims in seeing themselves as stronger, more self-assured people who do not deserve abuse. This can give the women strength to get out of the relationship, or seek help. But getting out of an abusive relationship is just the first of many steps on the road to recovery. IPV can be very damaging to a woman's self-esteem (Sleutel, 1998; Senter & Caldwell, 2002), confidence (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983), and feelings of safety (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

Repercussions of violence against women (VAW). Sleutel's (1998) meta-analysis of qualitative research on women's experiences of abuse found that undermining and devaluing the battered woman's identity affects her self-esteem. The effects are even greater for emotional abuse than physical abuse, due to the devastating feelings of inferiority inflicted by such abuse. Ferraro and Johnson (1983) explain this finding:

> At the interpersonal level, psychological abuse accompanying violence often invokes feelings of guilt and shame in the battered victim. Men define violence as a response to their wives' inadequacies or provocations, which leads battered women to feel that they have failed. Such character assaults are devastating, and create long-lasting feelings of inferiority. (p. 334)

This is one of the reasons battered women have such a high risk for mental health disorders (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). Living in constant fear can have devastating effects on a woman. “Feelings of fear are experienced psychologically as well as emotionally. Battered women experience aches and fatigue, stomach pains, diarrhea or constipation, tension headaches, shakes, chills, loss of appetite, and insomnia” (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, p. 334). Though the lasting effects of IPV are significant, many women are able to move on from their abuse, heal and grow as individuals, and create healthy relationships in the future. The most influential aid in a woman getting out of an abusive relationship and in coping afterwards is social support (Brosi & Rolling, 2010).

Lived experiences of sexual assault. Finally, while there is considerable research on IPV there is significantly less research on the lived experiences of victims of sexual assault and rape. What is known however, is that similarly with many victims of intimate partner violence, not all sexual assault and rape victims label their experiences as violence against women. Littleton, Breitkopf, and Berenson (2008) explain that “many victims do not acknowledge their rape experience because it is inconsistent with their own and societal rape scripts, or set of event-related ideas about rape” (p. 270). Another finding that echoes that of victims of IPV is the crucial role of social support in healing and moving on after an experience of gender-based violence. “Social support has been found to act as a protective factor with regard to victims’ use of maladaptive coping following rape, such that victims with stronger support networks engage in less maladaptive coping” (Littleton & Henderson, 2009, p. 152).

Violence against women, whether it is IPV or sexual violence, is a complicated problem which affects a woman’s understanding of herself on an individual level as well

as within a greater cultural context. Understanding the impact on women, from their perspective is far from understood. I turn to this topic next, beginning with a discussion on the importance of narratives in human existence, communication, and understanding.

Personal and cultural narratives. Individuals use narratives to make sense of themselves, their identities, and their experiences. Narratives are resolutely social—"culturally constructed, sustained, reproduced, and sometimes altered" (Wood, 2001, p. 241). They are particularly sought when an experience does not make sense and coherence needs to be generated. Narratives sought and used by individuals are one medium, which can be examined to determine the norms, beliefs, and attitudes of a culture. They also play an important role in the understanding of social issues and movements.

Lehrner and Allen (2008) state that it is imperative to study the "narratives of social actors" because they are critical in the "meaning-making within social movements" (p. 221). By allowing the voices and stories of victims of violence against women to be heard, their unique experiences can be validated and may have the ability to open the door for even more victims to share their own stories and experiences. Unfortunately, many victims do not report their abuse. This lack of reporting derives from the dearth of validation and support many victims receive from those placed in a position of protecting them and finding and charging their attacker (Meyers, 1997). It is important to note that every experience is different, and it is these differences that make each and every story significant. Without these narratives, society is presented with an unrealistic and, often, harmful portrayal of violence against women, and those it affects. In order to fully grasp

the severity of what the victims of violence against women go through lived experience narratives are a vital, yet challenging medium to examine.

Most of what the public knows about victim's lived experiences is either through the media or the groups who work with victims yet, lived experiences are more difficult to fully comprehend and to categorize than the discourse media provide (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). The media's singular and limited portrayals work to skew the understanding many people, including victims, have of the social problem (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). Even groups and organizations, which aid victims in the recovery process use "institutional talk" in order to assist victims in sharing their narratives and experiences. Institutional talk is defined by Berns and Schweingruber (2007) as "discourses used by institutions, groups, and organizations to help shape people's self narrative" (p. 242). Victims may actually reject these narratives, which include institutional talk, "because lived experience is more ambiguous and complicated than the official narrative script allows" (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007, p. 243). In order to understand the individual narratives of victims it is essential to also understand the cultural narratives that help construct women's relationships, as well as how cultures discuss, interpret, and understand violence against women within their own culture and norms.

An example of a culturally determined narrative in Western culture is the fairy tale romance narrative. This romance narrative acquires much of its beginnings from fairy tales and is "further bolstered through the media" (Wood, 2001, p. 242). The fairy tale romance narratives lead people to believe that women need to be rescued by men and in order to be "complete and fulfilled" women need men. Within these romantic

narratives are gender narratives, which are deeply embedded in Western culture. The fairy tale romance and gender narratives are continually portrayed in all forms of media—television shows, made-for-TV movies, films, magazines, popular literature, newspapers, advice columns, soap operas, news programs, song lyrics, music videos, etc. "As the media and other cultural institutions reproduce the gendered and romance narratives, women and men learn the roles culture prescribes, or allows, for them. Women are taught to be accommodating and to seek and please men; men are taught to be dominating and to regard women as inferior" (Wood, 2001, p. 242).

As noted, narratives are particularly sought when an experience does not agree with one's understanding of themselves and/or their relationships. "Experience becomes incoherent when romantic relationships do not adhere to the central romance narrative" (Wood, 2001, p. 242). When women are faced with a violent romantic partner they are not easily able to "fit their experience within the central romance narrative offered by the culture" (Wood, 2001, p. 242). Wood (2001) eloquently displays the incoherence within these intimate relationships, "The simultaneity of professed love and enacted violence, the romantic times and the brutal ones, the tender embraces and the black eyes, the unpredictable transformations of Prince Charming to frog and back again" (pp. 242-3). Because of this incoherence, the female victims of intimate partner violence attempt to find a way to make sense of their experiences. They do this in one of three ways. One is to interpret the relationship in such a way that it corresponds to the culturally agreed upon romance and gender narratives, which tell the women that love can conquer all and they can fix their abusive partner. The second is to make sense of their abuse using dark romance narratives, which tell the female victims that violence is a normal part of a

relationship. The third, and most difficult, is to create a new narrative that allows the women to define violence as unacceptable in relationships (Wood, 2001). First I will discuss the use of fairy tale narratives, which shape the mindset of the female victims as they are culturally agreed upon and widely accepted.

Victim beliefs. All of the women in Wood's (2001) study on the female victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) reported their relationships as initially appearing as a fairy tale romance. "The fairy tale narrative does not preclude problems, but it does maintain that love can conquer any hardship" (Wood, 2001, p. 250). Wood (2001) identified four beliefs held by the victims, which allowed the women to view their relationship as a fairytale romance narrative. "The most prominent belief women relied on to bolster the fairy tale narrative was that the violence was not as bad as it could have been, had been before, or others experienced" (Wood, 2001, p. 250). The women relayed that the violence they had experienced was not "bad enough" to constitute leaving. The image in the women's minds of what was "bad enough" had not been reached—some of the victims even acknowledged hoping that their romantic partners would do something "bad enough" so that they could justify leaving them. Also because of the slow increments of increasing violence and control, many of the female victims of IPV became desensitized to the violence within their relationships. One woman in Wood's (2001) study discussed how desensitization played a role in her relationship with an abusive partner, "if he had kicked me on the floor and made me eat off it that first time when he just slapped me for looking wrong at a waiter, I would have been out of there. But it was like what he did to me when his bad side came out just got worse over time and so I did take it…. It was just so gradual like that I kind of got used to his bad spells" (p. 257). The

second belief identified by Wood (2001) as maintaining the fairy tale romance narrative is that the "good" times in the relationship outweigh the "bad." One of the reasons for this is because there was an increase in intimacy following violent periods—this is often called the "honeymoon period." Third, is the belief held by the female victims of IPV that they had the power to control the violence or put an end to it. The women felt that they were to blame for their own victimization—so if they controlled themselves (i.e., their behaviors or arguing with their partner) then they could control whether or not their partner would abuse them. Finally, Wood (2001) noted the belief that the victims held that the abusive side of their partner was "not the real him" (p. 252). This belief dissociates the violence from the perpetrator and places blame on factors that were beyond the man's control. If the experiences the women went through were still inconsistent with the fairy tale romance narrative, an alternative narrative was sought out.

An alternative to the fairy tale romance narrative that is used by female victims of IPV to normalize and make sense of their abuse is the dark romance narrative, which "portrays violence as a routine part of living relationships" (Wood, 2001, p. 243). The dark romance narrative "claims that it is normal for men to have 'bad spells,'" (Wood, 2001, p. 253), and that in order to be a good woman and supportive wife the woman must be forgiving of the abuse and unhappiness within her relationship because she would be incomplete without her man.

Women come to accept such narratives by observing the behaviors and attitudes of friends and family. Some reported seeing their mothers abused by their fathers or even being abused themselves. The violence/abuse was not displayed as a problem—it was a

normal part of a relationship and because of this the women did not view their own abuse as out of the ordinary or something they did not deserve (Wood, 2001).

There were two major beliefs Wood (2001) identified that the female victims of IPV used to bolster the dark romance narrative. These are: 1) the belief that they deserved the violence and abuse, and 2) the belief that they were "stuck" in the abusive relationship. Seventeen of the 20 women in Wood's (2001) study "attributed violence inflicted on them to themselves, their actions, or their inactions" (p. 254). Wood (2001) also found "a second form of self-blame was to believe violence was motivated by partners' desire to help overcome failings or punish them for bad behavior" (p. 254).

"The second belief that justified accepting the dark romance narrative was that there was no acceptable option" (Wood, 2001, p. 255). The most commonly cited reason for feeling unable to leave an abusive relationship was that serious investments had already been made, such as having lost one's virginity to an intimate partner prior to marriage, being Christian, and expecting an ideal future (Wood, 2001). The gender narrative is unequivocally tied to the belief of being stuck in an abusive relationship because many women cite feeling incomplete without men (Wood, 2001). However, instead of using either the fairy tale romance narrative or the dark romance narrative to make sense of and tolerate the violence within their relationships, there is a third option for women victims of IPV.

This third option is to "invent a new narrative that defines violence as unacceptable in romantic relationships; justifies leaving a violent partner, dissociates women's goodness from standing by their men in any and all circumstances, and maintains a woman's worth is not dependent on her ability to 'catch and hold' a man"

(Wood, 2001, p. 244). This is a much harder option for many of the women to choose, but it is still viable as cultural narratives are created and edited every day. The victims of violence against women are not the only ones who employ cultural narratives to make sense of their experiences.

Perpetrator beliefs. Abusive men also make use of cultural discourse of male dominance and privilege as well as masculinity. “Many men discuss their violence as an enforcement of the patriarchal masculinity narrative” (Boonzaier, 2008, p. 184). Men may utilize violence against women as a way to “maintain their hold on hegemonic forms of masculinity” (Boonzaier, 2008, p. 184). Power and emasculation are excuses perpetrators of violence against women use for their acts of violence against their wives and romantic partners. Some claimed the repeated calls to the police as betrayal and disempowerment (Boonzaier, 2008).

Many of the men did not actually view themselves as perpetrators; most were actually court-mandated to be a part of perpetrator programs. Viewing themselves as perpetrators or abusers caused dissonance in their understanding of their self-identity (Boonzaier, 2008). A common theme among perpetrator narratives is the employing of a self-identity, which does not meet the criteria of “perpetrator” or “abuser.” Many abusive men use tactics to disassociate themselves with their acts of violence. The men try to place blame on an entity separate from themselves. Sometimes the perpetrators blame their female partners for emasculating them. By doing so, they “masculinize” their female partners and place themselves in the role of victim (Boonzaier, 2008). “Narratives of emasculation are cultural resources that provide very powerful rhetorical functions. They allow men to explain away their violence toward an intimate woman partner” (Boonzaier,

2008, p. 192). These narratives, as well as the cultural narratives, which allow violence against women to persist need to be examined and re-evaluated.

Narratives play a vital and fundamental role in any culture. They are used by individuals to makes sense of themselves, their identities, and their role in society. Cultural narratives show people how to act and interact, and are a major part of socialization. They display the public's understanding of an issue as well as the norms that are a part of the culture. There are several cultural narratives, which are deeply embedded in Western culture that have been found to be prevalent among victims of violence against women. As noted above, the first is the fairy tale romance narrative. This narrative allows women to believe that they need to be rescued by men, as well as they need a man to be fulfilled and complete. This narrative is especially dangerous in that it leaves many women feeling stuck in their abusive relationships (Wood, 2001). Gender narratives are also a major part of Western culture; they prescribe how men and women should behave and interact, and are even located within the romance narratives. According to the prescribed gender narratives in Western culture, women should be accommodating and supportive of their male partners, but not overpowering, while men should be dominant, strong, and in control. Problems occur in certain relationships when men feel that their female partner is somehow overpowering them. Abusive men who feel they are being emasculated will take this out on their female partner through violence and domination to prove to themselves and society that they are still "the man." The final cultural narrative discussed by Woods (2001) is the dark romance narrative, which is used by victims in order to normalize and make sense of the violence they are experiencing. These narratives allow the women to believe that the violence and abuse

that they are experiencing is normal and that they must be forgiving and supportive of their male partner. The cultural narratives used to make sense of and explain violence against women are deeply embedded in Western culture, yet they are narrow and incomplete because of their lack of perspectives on the crimes and their subsequent impact on society. Cultural and romance narratives are unable to tell us what the experience means to women. Therefore, it is also important to examine how victims of violence against women narrate their personal experiences.

Stereotyping of violence against women does not only happen in cultural narratives, such as fairy tales. It also happens in news narratives delivered to the public. News narratives also help develop the larger cultural understanding of violence against women that exists in our society. I turn to this topic now.

Media influence. "The media play a crucial role in the institutionalization of social problems and in influencing people's perceptions of the nature and scope of social problems" (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007, p. 242). Indeed, much of the research on violence against women focuses on the news coverage of the crimes. Crime news coverage typically ignores the voices of the victims of violence; as such their personal stories are left largely untold and invalidated. What is told is an edited version of their experience—a version that is created for the courtroom or for news organizations. The experiences of the victims in their own words are, in turn, edited resulting in a portrayal of violence that is decontextualized and unrealistic.

Carll (2003) discusses the critical role news media play in society as a reflection of norms, stereotypes, and public opinion:

> The media not only reflects what is occurring in our society but also reinforces stereotypes of how women are viewed, both as victims and perpetrators of

> violence. Therefore, how the news media covers this social problem is vitally important, because the news media plays a major role in shaping public opinion and public policy, with stereotypes even becoming embedded in the judicial system. (p. 1601)

The news narratives are a reflection of real life, the representations they display of violence against women is more influential than fictional representations because the audience views the representations from the news as fact (Carll, 2003). Researchers study these representations to determine the messages, frames, and narratives the news media display to the public.

There is a vast amount of informative research regarding how media influence an audience. Cultivation theory is one such theory that informs how audiences are influenced by media, particularly television. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorelli, and Shanahan (2002) posit that heavy television viewing cultivates an audience to have a particular and often unrealistic view of the world. Heavy viewers who have experienced violence firsthand (e.g., a victim of gender based violence) and then witness violence on television will replay their experience and have an even greater cultivation effect. These effects are cultivated over time. Researchers have found stereotypes about violence and gender, such as rape myths are cultivated through media (Cuklanz, 2000; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorelli, & Shanahan, 2002; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011).

The way the news media choose to sensationalize certain aspects of a case can distort the facts and can create and/or perpetuate popular myths regarding victims and perpetrators (or suspects) of violence against women (Hamlin, 1988; Dowler, 2006). News frames are one way media encourage the audience to focus on a single aspect of a story or case, or to adjust their viewpoint on the case, those involved, or the larger social issue at play. Dowler (2006) defines framing by stating, “Frames supply contextual cues

which provide order and meaning to problems, events, and actions" (p. 385). News frames allow viewers to understand messages in particular ways by guiding them and placing stories into categories, which are familiar to them. The news media utilize frames to simplify and organize the information in their report, as well as to structure the narrative and allow the audience to relate a familiar story into an already understood structure or frame (Tuchman, 1978). News frames promote a particular interpretation of the event presented by prioritizing certain aspects and facts, while leaving out or minimizing other details (Entman, 1993). Recognizing the news frames present in stories about violence against women gives insight into public knowledge on the subject.

Frames present in news media. The importance of frames lies in the myths they perpetuate. The way in which perpetrators, suspects, and victims are framed by the news media is crucial to understanding the rape myths believed by many members of the public. Some examples of rape myths include "'only bad girls get raped'; 'any healthy woman can resist a rapist if she really wants to'; 'women ask for it'; 'women 'cry rape' only when they've been jilted or have something to cover up'; 'rapists are sex-starved, insane, or both'" (Burt, 1980, p. 217). Rape myths are not just perpetuated by news media, but also by entertainment media. In a study in which 26 prime-time television storylines involving rape were analyzed, Brinson (1989) found that on average there was at least one rape myth was referenced per storyline. Research has shown that "the persistence of rape myths in society may be facilitated by the prevalence of these myths on television" (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011, p. 217). These rape myths continually delegitimize sexist violence and sex crimes, which are far too prevalent in our society.

Many times rape and other sex crimes are equated more with sex than with power,

control, domination, and violence (Meyers, 1997; Dowler, 2006). This is not only incorrect, but a dangerous myth to continually perpetuate as it allows the public to be absolved of their responsibility of ending the violence by maintaining the mirage of individual pathology and disassociating these crimes from male domination and power in society (Carll, 2003; Carll, 2005). As Dowler states: “Sex crime coverage was portrayed through paternalistic and patriarchal viewpoints. Rape victims were stereotyped, minimized, ignored, or used as scapegoats for male actions that were based in sexual desire and misinterpretation, rather than male dominance and violence” (p. 385).

Similarly, even though most rapes are actually acquaintance rapes (i.e., committed by men who know the victims), the news disseminates images and stories, which perpetuate rape as being committed by strangers (Cowan, 2000). A consequence of such unrealistic portrayals is the myth that acquaintance rape is oftentimes not seen as real rape, and the victims’ experiences are not validated (Cowan, 2000). The different ways suspects and perpetrators are framed by the news media affect the ways the audience (including victims) understands violence against women and those who commit it. With media portraying only “sick” men, who have no control over their actions, as committing acts of violence against women, the public’s perception of violence committed by a sane and “normal” man or an acquaintance is subsequently affected. Such portrayals encourage the public to believe the myth that acts of violence committed by an acquaintance or a non-“sick” man are not actually crimes, and that the victim had control over the situation. These frames continue to perpetuate victim blaming, as well as male supremacy, patriarchy, and misogyny in our society (Dowler, 2006).

The frames employed by media lack true perspective on the actual crimes and lived experiences of the victims, as well as the impact of the crime on violence against women as a major social issue. Dowler (2006) discusses the portrayals found in local television news coverage of sex crimes, “The realities of rape and the effects on victims, family members, and the community were not even discussed. News reports employed sex crime stories as a means to disturb and upset viewers, not to educate or inform viewers about the reality of sex crime in contemporary society” (p. 388). Subsequently, the public’s comprehension of violence against women is narrow and incomplete.

In sum, the frames used are helpful to understanding the news media’s role in shaping public opinion and beliefs regarding the perpetrators and victims of violence against women, as well as the acceptability of violence within the culture. News frames delegitimize violence against women as a social issue by equating the violent acts with sex as opposed to power, control, or domination. Such accounts misrepresent the severity of acquaintance rape. They take the blame from the perpetrator. And they portray a lack of perspective on the gravity of violence against women as a social epidemic rooted in patriarchy, male dominance, and misogyny. While it is important to understand how news stories are framed and help shape the public’s understanding of sexual violence, it is also important to understand how media portray violence against women. News narratives impact the public’s understanding of violence, who commits acts of violence, who the victims are, and what violence is acceptable or unacceptable. Now that we have a better understanding of the media’s role, I will discuss the mediated portrayals of victims of violence against women.

Mediated portrayals of victims of violence against women. Since the portrayals of victims are largely mediated, violence against women as a social issue is often misunderstood. Several researchers and scholars of violence against women discuss the dichotomy present in the images and representations of victims of violence (particularly rape victims). Benedict (1992) uses the terms “vamp” and “virgin” to talk about the two types of victims portrayed in media, but other researchers have used analogous terms (e.g., good girl/bad girl, Madonna/whore). These binaries, which play a substantial role in the way in which victims are understood by the public, define the victims either as loose, by their sexuality, looks, and supposed lack of morals; or as innocent and pure girls who have been violated by some sick, psycho, extremely abnormal monster of a man who could not control his own actions (Benedict, 1992; Dowler, 2006). Benedict states:

> Both of these narratives are destructive because it blames the victim of the crime instead of the perpetrator. The virgin is destructive because it perpetuates the idea that women can only be Madonnas or whores, paints women dishonestly, and relies on portraying the suspects as inhuman monsters. (p. 24)

These portrayals also further bolster the media’s questioning of the victim’s credibility.

Dowler (2006) found that “questioning the credibility of the victim was a prominent feature in sex crime stories that appeared in the court stage” (p. 389). Drawing on Dowler (2006) it can be noted that until a perpetrator is actually convicted of the crime they are on trial for, a victim must continually defend herself, her credibility, and her actions, behaviors, and morality. In short, the focus is on the victim’s character not on the violent experience or its impact on her. Once a victim’s credibility is called into question, the news media and, therefore, society and the public begin to blame the victim for her own abuse.

Victim blaming. Victim blaming is far too prevalent in society (especially in regard to violence against women). It happens through news media, in trials, by lawyers, police, and sometimes even by victim support staff (Thapar-Björket & Morgan, 2010). The victim is on trial just as much, if not more than the suspect—and the credibility of both the suspect and the victim lie on several irrelevant facts, including race, background, ethnicity, age, and class (Brownmiller, 1975; Meyers, 1997; Cowan, 2000; Dowler, 2006). Cowan (2000) explains that victim blaming occurs because of the belief in several stereotypes (similar to rape myths), which include: "the victim enjoyed/wanted it, the victim asked for or deserved it, it only happens to certain types of women in certain kinds of families, and the victims tell lies or exaggerate" (p. 238). These rape/victim-blaming myths are devastating not only to the victim, but also to violence against women as a societal construct. Wood (2001) states, "Research shows that both women and men often blame women for men's violence against women. Men who have been convicted of rape and other forms of violence against women assert that the women provoked them, had it coming, wanted it, enjoyed it, and did not merit more respectful treatment" (Wood, 2001, p. 244). What is even more telling is that that many female victims of violence blame themselves for the violence or abuse inflicted upon them. An astounding finding by Wood (2001) is that the women in her study—who were all formerly in abusive relationships—found the violence used against them as understandable and justifiable when it occurred. She also found that "the women's accounts were framed by gender and romance narratives that were used to explain and justify violence" (p. 247).

Victim blaming is so entrenched in our culture and in society's perspective on violence against women, that even well trained victim support volunteers have been

found to hold some victim blaming beliefs (Thapar-Björket & Morgan, 2010). Thapar-Björket and Morgan (2010) discuss these findings:

> Nevertheless, despite their training and their evident sincerity in supporting and encouraging women victims of violence, it could also be suggested that the volunteers struggle with the idea that perpetrators of violence are solely to blame for their actions. Statements of those interviewed indicated that some believe that there are occasions when women victims, to some extent, are accountable for what has happened to them. For example, women who transgress acceptable boundaries of dress, behavior, or femininity may be seen as complicit in what has happened to them—as individually responsible for their fate. (p. 40)

Battered women are paradoxically blamed. They are expected to keep homes and families together regardless of the personal cost, while they are concurrently being questioned and/or blamed for not leaving the abusive relationship sooner (Enander, 2010).

Meyers (1997) argues that news narratives play into the male domination that exists in our society in the way they present the facts and issues of a case. The female victim is blamed by the male dominated society and the male perpetrator is justified because of either the condemnation of his victim or issues that are out of his “control” (such as being under the influence of alcohol, being crazy or psychotic, or having an obsession). The news narratives utilize ideologies, stereotypes, and myths to frame the issue of violence against women. The ideologies, stereotypes, and myths used are all a part of the overarching cultural narrative of violence against women. Media play an enormous role in creating and shaping the cultural narratives in our society because of their ubiquitousness in our lives.

In sum, past research has found that mediated coverage of violence against women portrays a version of the women’s narratives, which oftentimes does not correlate with actual lived experiences (Meyers, 1997; Dowler, 2006). The female victims of violence have their credibility, morality, and past behaviors continually questioned by the

news media, as well as the criminal justice system (even if their actual names and/or identities are not given) (Dowler, 2006). News media aid in the blaming of victims by characterizing the women as either “virgins” or “vamps” and then using those terms to conclude whether or not the women deserved to be attacked (Benedict, 1992; Cowan, 2000). Yet, these news narratives fail to convey the victims’ own perspective/narrative. News narratives describe the victim, label her, but give her no voice. Thus the public’s understanding of violence against women is void of the personal experiences and narratives of the female victims of violence, such an understanding of violence against women as a social issue is important if we are to truly understand a significant crime that is plaguing our world. Thus there’s hope to fill this void by focusing on the personal narratives of victims of violence against women.

This chapter has outlined the current knowledge on the subject of violence against women. First, is the worldwide prevalence of this epidemic, with numbers as high as one in three women being the victim of a gender-based crime in her lifetime (Amnesty International USA, 2012). Even with such a high rate of victimization, there are still not accurate portrayals in media of victims’ lived experiences (Dowler, 2006). Victims’ voices are largely left out of the discussion of violence against women, which is primarily made up of mediated portrayals. These mediated portrayals simplify the complicated reality of lived experience by using journalistic frames, which perpetuate stereotypes and rape myths commonly used by the media and believed by the public, including victims (Benedict, 1992). These stereotypes and myths are so often believed by the public because most view the news media as an accurate portrayal of reality (Carll, 2003). These simplistic and unrealistic portrayals of violence against women leave the actual victims

feeling isolated in their experiences because they do not fit into the journalistic frames used by the media. The next chapter sets the theoretical foundation for this study.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

As noted in Chapter One, violence against women is a devastating worldwide epidemic. Current statistics suggest that one in three women worldwide will be victim of some sort of gender-based violence in her lifetime (Amnesty International USA, 2012). Though there are many organizations working to put an end to the atrocities taking place across the globe, more are being discovered every day, with no end to the violence—or its deep-seeded societal roots—in sight. Sadly, the stories being reported on the violence are not always accurate representations of reality, or of the victims' lived experiences (Dowler, 2006). Many of the representations even perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Benedict, 1992). Because the public's understanding of social issues is based largely on mediated portrayals, it is important to evaluate the messages found within those depictions. Most view the news media as an accurate portrayal of reality, and as such, the representations located within are oftentimes more influential than fictional representations, such as entertainment media (Carll, 2003). However, news media simplify the issues, and use frames to place stories into familiar categories to ease in the audience's interpretation. Actual violence tends to be much more complicated than the news media portray, which leaves victims unable to fit their experiences into the basic journalistic frames, and feeling even more isolated in their experiences (Cowan, 2000).

This study hopes to illuminate the realities of the lived experiences of victims, based on their own accounts and—as much as possible—in their own words. Following is the research question to be answered by the current study,

RQ 1: What stories do victims of violence against women (VAW) tell about their experience and how they see themselves?

In order to best address the research question, the personal narratives of victims of violence against women will be examined. The narratives being analyzed are published works either written first hand by a victim or told to and written by a third party (i.e., friend, researcher, or family member). In total there are 22 stories to be analyzed, 9 of those are written by the actual victim, while the other 13 were given by a victim to a third party. The narratives analyzed for this study are public presentations of victims' stories and experiences; that is stories written or told by the victim, and published in edited anthologies on violence against women, or published as a single author story. The narratives selected are representative of the crimes that appear in the public discourse on violence against women (including physical, sexual, and psychological). It needs to be noted that while personal victim stories are indispensable to generating a comprehensive understanding of the experiences many women go through, these stories are few and far between. Because there are limited published narratives written by victims themselves, edited versions, that is stories told by the victims to others, will also be analyzed. The edited versions still include the victims' own words and experiences. They are included as they too are part of the public discourse of victim stories, victims whose own voices have been continually silenced.

The narratives analyzed come from three separate books. One is memoir in which the author recounts her own personal story of rape (*Lucky* by Alice Sebold), while the other two are anthologies of writings about violence against women, which include public presentations of victims' stories and experiences (*A Memory, A Monologue, A*

Rant and A Prayer edited by Eve Ensler and Mollie Doyle, and *Surviving Domestic Violence: Voices of Women Who Broke Free* written and edited by Elaine Weiss). Both of these are compilations of stories of victims of violence against women. Weiss's book contains the stories of 12 women (including her own) who have been victims of domestic violence. When discussing Elaine Weiss I will refer to her as "Elaine" when discussing her personal story of victimization (as first names have been used for all victims), and as "Weiss" when referring to her as author, editor, and researcher of violence against women. In personal correspondence, Weiss stated that she conducted interviews with 36 female victims of domestic abuse, and chose narratives, which she felt were the most representative of all of the victim's voices, experiences, and stories. Weiss, herself, is a victim of domestic violence, and as she relays the women's stories and experiences, her voice is present and easily separated from that of the victim. Ensler and Doyle's compilation contains 49 stories regarding all forms of violence against women from individuals who have witnessed these atrocities (not necessarily victims). The only stories that will be analyzed from this compilation are nine narratives written or told by actual victims. Both of these books were selected based on their broad range of topics covered, as well as the amount of stories within each.

As noted above, there are two main forms of victim narratives that will be analyzed. The first is the personal narrative, written first hand by victims of violence against women. The narratives, which are a part of this category, are: (1) *Lucky* by Alice Sebold, (2) "My story" by Elaine Weiss (in *Surviving Domestic Violence: Voices of Women Who Broke Free*), (3) "Darkness" by Betty Gale Tyson with Jerry Capers, (4) "First Kiss" by Mollie Doyle, (5) "Groceries" by Abiola Abrams, (6) "Blueberry Hill" by

Christine House, (7) “Bitter Coffee” by Jody Williams, (8) “Maurice” by Kathy Najimy, and (9) “The Next Fantastic Leap” by Elizabeth Lesser (3-9 are all in the anthology: *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and A Prayer* and *Surviving Domestic Violence: Voices of Women Who Broke Free* edited by Eve Ensler and Mollie Doyle). The second type of victim story being analyzed is the personal narrative given by the victim to family members, friends, or editors. As noted, though these stories are edited or written by a third party, they are still one of the only public discourses of victims’ experiences. The stories written in this form come from the two anthologies. Eleven of these narratives come from Weiss’s *Surviving Domestic Violence: Voices of Women Who Broke Free*, these are: (1) “Judy North: It Was As Though He Had an Invisible Whip” (2) “Mandy Winchester: I Kept Trying to Get It Right” (3) “Peg McBride: I Assembled the Jigsaw Puzzle” (4) “Carolee Curtis: I Bided My Time” (5) “Becky Pepper: I Balanced the Fears” (6) “Whitney Benson: Will the Scars Ever Heal?” (7) “Andrea Hartley: Was It My Fault?” (8) “Dawn Kincaid: Am I Really Safe?” (9) “Jesusa Fox: I Am Picturing the Future” (10) “Lilia Lopez: I Am Making a Difference” and (11) “Maryellen Kasimian: I Am Stronger Than Ever.” The last two narratives written by a third party come from Ensler and Doyle’s *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and A Prayer*: (1) “My Two Selves” written by Patricia Bosworth, told by her adopted daughter Mara; and (2) “My Mother with Her Hands as Knives” written by Dave Eggers based on a young Sudanese woman’s experiences. In total, 22 stories will be analyzed, 9 written by actual victims, and 13 stories given by victims to a third party. All of these stories will help determine the socially constructed narrative of what it means to be a victim.

By evaluating the victim narratives, a better understanding will be garnered about the motivations, emotions, and ideologies of women who have been the victim of gender-based violence, as well as how they fit their personal victimization into their self-descriptions. This study is grounded in the notion that narratives give insight into the culture in which they were created because communication constructs social reality.

Social Construction of Reality

The theoretical framework, which guides the present study, is Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality. They argue that repeated patterns of behavior help human beings function effectively in their day-to-day lives and in the society in which they live. These patterns of behavior, more often than not, mirror societal norms, and display an adherence to appropriate and acceptable behaviors according to society. By continually following societal norms, many begin to view them as inherently natural and do not question their origin or existence. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that these norms are not, in fact, inherently natural, but are actually learned patterns of behaviors.

According to Berger and Luckman (1966) social reality is created, and perpetually upheld by language, symbols, and the agreed upon meaning of each. Social reality, however, is not a singular entity, but an ever-changing and evolving notion that is particular to a culture, a sub-culture, or even an individual. In order to gain an understanding of an individual or culture, phenomenologists decipher how people or groups of people create meaning from their surroundings and experiences. The goal is not to explain some aspect of truth because there are multiple truths, just as there are multiple realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rather, the goal is to understand how these realities

are constructed and to determine what they mean. The multiple realities and their meaning are shaped through language and discourse. Furthermore, not only is reality socially constructed, it is also mutually constructed. Each symbol created by a culture has meaning, and though that meaning is not static, communities form and realities are constructed through the shared meaning of these symbols. These shared meanings dictate socially appropriate behavior, thus determining social norms. One problem which has arisen from these socially constructed realities and norms is that many begin to view these norms as inherently natural and intrinsic, as in the case of violence against women and in the limited portrayals of women who are victims of such violence. A more realistic and informed understanding of the lived realities of victims of violence against women can be gathered by using victim narratives as a way to generate knowledge from the standpoint of actual victims.

Feminist standpoint theory builds on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) assertion that social reality is both constructed and particular to one's culture, surroundings, and experiences. The realities of the victims of violence against women can be better understood through the use of feminist standpoint theory.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory "builds on the assertion that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression" (Swigonski, 1993, p. 173). Research from a positivistic epistemology upholds objectivity and searching for a singular universal truth (Harding, 1991). Much of this type of research focuses on personal differences, which "frequently leads to findings that blame the victim, a fallacy in reasoning that makes those who suffer from social inequalities

appear to be the cause of those inequalities" (Swigonski, 1993, p. 173). Feminist standpoint theory, on the other hand, stems from the idea that there is no one universal truth, but a multitude of truths, as well as the understanding that our realities are derived from our experiences and social location (Hirschmarm, 1998). Taking into consideration the profound impact social location has on perceptions of research issues and questions, feminist standpoint theory encourages researchers "to expand the resource base of research to include and identify research problems from the day-to-day reality of marginalized, less powerful groups" (Swigonski, 1993, p. 175). This thesis attempts to do just that through the use of texts written or told by victims of violence against women as the sources of data.

By using a standpoint approach to research we can "ensure research does not inadvertently victimize or oppress the subjects" (Swigonski, 1993, p. 175). Hirschmarm reifies the goal of standpoint theory "is not to 'act out' women's experiences but to theorize them critically and to learn about women's response to oppression as much as about oppression itself" (Hirschmarm, 1998, p. 75). Using this approach as epistemology means that the oppression women experience generates knowledge, which has previously been left out (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995). "Provisionally, standpoint theory reflects the view that women (or feminists) occupy a social location that affords them/us a privileged access to social phenomena" (Longino, 1993, p. 201). Stemming from an analysis of power relations, feminist standpoint theory maintains that current ways of knowing are hegemonic and are produced by those who have power in society, which are typically, but not necessarily, men (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995). Feminist standpoint theorists argue that "a more complete basis for knowledge can only be found by starting from the

perspective of women's experiences and lives, as well as from the lives of other social groups ordinarily excluded from the dominant social order" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995, pp. 14-15). By using the words of female victims who have been strategically oppressed I hope to generate a greater understanding of the experiences and lives of women who have generally been left out of the hegemonic discourse on the topic of violence against women. In one article van Wormer (2009) discusses feminist standpoint theory as it pertains to gender-based violence, she writes,

> Of special relevance to women's victimization are the following standpoint feminist values: reliance on the woman's personal narrative for truth telling; acceptance of a holistic, nondichotomized view of reality including a merging of the personal and political; a focus on choice and options; an understanding of the gendered nature of power relations in the society; and an emphasis on personal empowerment and respect for one's personal dignity. (van Wormer, 2009, p. 109)

The only way to truly understand the reality of women's victimization is to use the words and stories of the actual victims as a resource and basis of knowledge. In this thesis I am using the women's stories as a vantage point from which to view their social reality. My priority is not to maintain the hegemonic discourse that exists in society on violence against women and its victims, but to bring to light the realities and experiences of those who suffer these atrocities. In order to do this I will use symbolic convergence theory to make sense of the shared experiences and converged realities of victims of violence against women. These converged realities will illuminate the rhetorical vision through the use of fantasy theme analysis, which will be more thoroughly explained below.

Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis

According to Fisher (1985) as humans, we understand our lives and existence based on narratives. We use narratives on a daily basis to make sense of our experiences, those we interact with, and our surroundings. "They [narratives] allow us to interpret

reality because they help us decide what a particular experience ‘is about’ and how the various elements of our experience are connected” (Foss, 2004, p. 333).

Narratives are used to interpret and understand the world around us, as well as construct a collective reality (Bishop, 2001). When narratives converge, and more than one person holds a singular narrative to be true, a shared reality is created—this is symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1985). The shared reality created by symbolic convergence can account for a group consciousness with similar meanings, motives, and emotions.

The first part of symbolic convergence theory is ensuring there is group consciousness—this can be repeated patterns or forms of communication. The second part includes determining group fantasy themes and identifying the meanings, motives, and communication within them. The third part consists of interpreting this data and understanding why people share the fantasies they do (Bormann, 1985). According to Bormann, the power of symbolic convergence theory “stems from the human tendency to try to understand events in terms of people with certain personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen” (p. 134). By using human action to interpret events, we are able to place blame, assign responsibility, and propitiate guilt (Bormann, 1985).

Fantasy theme analysis is one method used in conjunction with symbolic convergence theory to interpret narratives, and can be applied to study “all kinds of rhetoric in which themes function dramatically to connect audiences with messages” (Foss, 2004, p. 109). Most humans crave an understanding of their existence and experiences, yet most events have too much complexity for them to understand fully. By

using narratives (or fantasy themes), a greater understanding can be generated about the events and issues surrounding them (Golden, Berquist, & Coleman, 1983). Specifically, fantasy theme analysis can be used to examine the symbolic reality of the female victims of gender-based violence.

Bormann (1985) defines the term fantasy as a "creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need" (p. 130). Fantasy theme refers to the verbal or nonverbal means through which interpretation is accomplished in communication. "Filling a rhetorical need to explain experience, fantasy themes use words, phrases, statements, or images to interpret events in the past, envision events in the future, or depict current events that are removed in time or space from the actual activities of the group" (Garner, Sterk, Adams, 1998, p. 62). Fantasy themes tell a story that constructs reality through the group's shared experience. Bormann (1972) uses the term "rhetorical vision" to explain the shared, symbolic reality created by composite dramas. "The rhetorical vision is a shared image of what the world is like and how people fit into the world" (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998, p. 63). The rhetorical vision contains fantasy themes on the setting, dramatis personae, and actions and aids scholars in determining the predominant emotion evoked, as well as the pragmatic motivations, and their subsequent action lines (Bormann, 1972). "The presence of a rhetorical vision suggests that a rhetorical community has been formed that consists of participants in the vision or members who have shared the fantasy themes" (Foss, 2004, p. 113). The rhetorical community being examined in the current study is female victims of violence against women. While this is a nonhomogeneous group, they all share a common experience of being the victim of gender-based violence. A better understanding of the

personal experiences of victims of violence against women will by understood by examining the rhetorical visions portrayed by the personal narratives of these women.

Procedure

Bormann's (1972) fantasy theme analysis was used in order to best answer the question of what stories victims of violence against women tell about their experiences. Each individual narrative was examined by locating key words and phrases to identify the scene or setting; the dramatis personae, (i.e., victims, perpetrators, heroes, non-heroes) their characteristics, motivations, and emotions; and the actions (including the nature of the violence) that took place within the scene. These are the themes commonly sought in narrative, as well as fantasy theme, analysis, which form an interpretation of reality (Foss, 2004). Emerging themes between texts were garnered in order to find an overarching rhetorical vision and display the symbolic reality of the victims. I allowed the victims' stories to speak for themselves, and gave priority to the perspectives and meanings found within their personal narratives. I compared and contrasted themes as they emerged with earlier themes. In this sense, I made use of the constant comparative process. Maykut and Morehouse (2003) explain this process, "As each new unit of meaning is selected for analysis, it is compared to all other units of meaning and subsequently grouped (categorized and coded) with similar units of meaning. If there are no similar units of meaning, a new category is formed" (p. 134). These categories were continually reevaluated throughout the process of analysis. They were omitted, combined, renamed, and created as I repeatedly examined the texts. After the data was exhausted, and the final categories and fantasy themes determined, an overarching narrative of the experiences of the victims of violence against women was established.

This “metastory” of the victims’ narratives will generate a more realistic understanding of the experiences of victims of violence against women that has been largely left out of the public discourse.

In sum, this chapter has discussed the data set that has been analyzed, the theoretical framework guiding the study, and the procedure used to analyze the data. The personal published works that have been analyzed are either first person accounts of victimization or experiences relayed by another person (friend, relative, researcher) to whom the victim told their personal story. In total 22 stories were analyzed. This thesis is guided by Berger and Luckman’s (1966) social construction of reality, which states that social reality is not inherently natural, but actually learned patterns of behavior. The authors intimate that our realities are shaped through language and discourse. Feminist standpoint theory goes further into the different perspectives people have based on their experiences as well as their social location. An assumption of feminist standpoint theory is that less powerful members of society actually have different realities stemming from the oppression they have experienced. By using the narratives of female victims I hope to illuminate the perspective of an oppressed group that has generally been left out of the hegemonic discourse of violence against women, and yet, is vital to understanding the realities that are taking place across the globe. In the following chapter I will identify the fantasy themes that emerged from the personal narratives of victims of violence against women.

CHAPTER THREE: A STORY OF PAIN AND REDEMOTION

As noted in the previous chapters, violence against women is far-reaching and much too common in our world. Amnesty International uses the statistic of one in three women that has been victimized by a gender-based crime in her lifetime (Amnesty International USA, 2012). Though there are a great number of organizations working to end these atrocities the reality of the lived experiences of victims is far from understood. Media are particularly harmful in their portrayals of violence against women. These media portrayals tend to be simplistic and unrealistic leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes and victim blaming (Benedict, 1992; Cowan, 2000; Dowler, 2006). Victims may begin to feel isolated in their experiences because victims' voices are largely left out of the discourse on violence against women (Cowan, 2000). In this thesis I am using 22 personal narratives written or told by victims of violence against women. I have analyzed these narratives using fantasy theme analysis in order to identify the shared reality of victims. The goal is to better understand the reality of what it means to be a victim of violence against women as well as to reveal what stories victims tell about their experiences. What follows is the overarching narrative that the victims of violence told.

The overarching story that was told by the victims of violence against women is one that has three parts. Part One tells the story of their victimization. In Part Two, the victims came to the realization that they were not at fault for their victimization. Part Three tells how the victims came to terms with their experience, modified their behaviors and became victims no more. In the end, by telling their stories they become heroes.

Together, these three parts reflect the victims' experiences from victimization to recovery.

As with all narratives, this story has scenes, dramatis personae and actions. The scenes where the violence took place were public, private, or pseudo-private spaces. The dramatis personae include the "victims of violence" (referred to by their first names), the "villains" (mainly referred to as "the perpetrator," but also may be identified by their first name and/or their relationship with the victim), and the others which includes heroes (supportive characters) and non-heroes (unsupportive or unaware characters all of whom appear to offer more harm than help to the victim). I will begin by describing the scenes where the action takes place, followed by brief descriptions of the key characteristics of the dramatis personae. The remaining section of this chapter will be devoted to telling the three parts of the narrative, weaving scene, dramatis personae and actions together. It is important to note that Alice's narrative is referenced more often than any of the other victims' narratives. This is because Alice wrote an entire book about her experience, whereas all of the other victims' narratives are part of a larger compilation, and have less room to talk about their experiences. Alice's book provides a much more detailed insight into a victim's life and experiences. I cannot say with certainty that all other victims had similar experiences or emotions. But in my view there is enough overlap in the narratives to allow her details to shine through in hopes of gaining a greater understanding of all the victim faces. I now turn to the key elements of the overall narrative (scene and dramatis personae descriptions) beginning with scene.

Scenes

The scene is the place where the violence took place. The scenes of violence primarily occurred in either public or private spaces. Overall, the narratives revealed the violence that took place in public was a demonstration of the perpetrator not feeling the need to hide their behavior. Public violence expressed to the victim that those who witnessed the violence did not think it was wrong because no one stepped in. The narratives revealed that violence within the private sphere caused some victims to lose any feelings of safety even in their own home. This is because home is usually considered to be a sanctuary, a safe space, so when violence has occurred within that space those feelings of safety may have been uprooted. Because all scenes could not be divided into these two categories, another category emerged I am calling pseudo-private. The pseudo-private category includes spaces, which may have been public, but some aspect of the space hid the violence from those who could step in to help or aid the victim. I now turn to a more detailed discussion of each scene.

Public spaces. Public spaces where violence took place included a university campus, a sports camp, in front of a movie theater, in a restaurant, and in the country of Sudan. Victims' narratives tell us violence that took place in these public spaces was a demonstration of the perpetrators' belief that their behavior was nothing they needed to hide. For example, the very first time Andrea's husband [perpetrator] was violent toward her was in the public sphere. Andrea and her husband were at an elegant restaurant in Hawaii on their honeymoon when out of nowhere he threw scalding hot coffee across the table and onto the exposed part of her chest (Andrea, 2004, p. 138). Though Andrea was in a great deal of pain, she was more confused by the incident than anything else. Andrea

recalled, “I really thought I was crazy” (Andrea, 2004, p. 138). Another example comes from Whitney. Her boyfriend, Brad, hit her so hard he knocked her to the ground outside of a movie theater in front of hundreds of witnesses, many of whom they knew (Whitney, 2004, p. 126). Mollie’s soccer counselor [perpetrator] forced her to kiss him at sports camp in front of other campers (Mollie, 2007, p. 19). Mollie was only six years old at the time and was so mortified that she ended up wetting her pants and running home after the incident. Another public space where violence occurred was on Syracuse University’s campus. Alice was raped in an amphitheater tunnel on campus. Though the perpetrator dragged her from the public brick path (Alice, 2002, pp. 5-6), others could hear what was going on as they walked by (pp. 10, 12). For the young Sudanese victim the violence that took place against her and her sisters happened during great unrest in their country, with militia taking control. The girls were taken from their family and abused in public, such as on the roads as they were forced to walk tied to each other for days, being treated like animals and property (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 35).

Not all women identified a particular location in public where violence took place, rather they indicated that it did and could occur anywhere. For Dawn what was most important was that her abusive husband did not hide his violence toward her. Dawn recalled, “It wasn’t anything he felt he needed to hide” (Dawn, 2004, p. 149). Randy [perpetrator] abused Dawn both publicly and privately, though he “never tried to hide his snide remarks and caustic insults” (Dawn, 2004, p. 149). Violence that took place in public demonstrates that the perpetrators like Randy and Brad either did not think their actions were wrong or they had no fear of consequences. The victims’ narratives revealed that being victimized in public made them believe that no one thought the violence being

inflicted on them was wrong, as no one stepped in. Whitney explains what went through her mind after being knocked to the ground by her boyfriend in front of hundreds of witnesses, “So this is okay? This is fine? This happens to everybody, is that what they’re trying to tell me? I was so confused…I sat in that movie theater thinking, no one else had a problem with that but me” (Whitney, 2004, p. 126). As will be discussed later, the act of stepping in while a woman is being victimized in public can serve to validate the woman’s feelings that the abuser is wrong and she does not deserve the abuse that is being inflicted on her. Victims also revealed in their narratives that it was quite embarrassing for them to be violated in the public sphere, as was the case for Mollie. Public displays of violence, however, were not the only sites of victim abuse. Violence also took place in pseudo-private spaces that could not be categorized as completely public or private.

Pseudo-private spaces. Though pseudo-private spaces could not quite be labeled as public or private they had an aspect of both spheres. For example, Jody was raped in El Salvador during great unrest and killing. She was actually in El Salvador to work against the very group (death eaters) of which the perpetrator was a part. Jody was raped in her hotel room, so she was out of ear- or eye-sight of possible witnesses. But the perpetrator’s uncle owned the hotel where Jody was staying, which meant the perpetrator had access to her. I have designated this space as pseudo-private because the hotel room had become Jody’s “safe” space in El Salvador, yet the perpetrator was able to gain access to her room because of his connections to the owner of the hotel. Though there were no witnesses to Jody’s rape, it was no secret to why the perpetrator needed to be let into the secure hotel and ultimately her room (Jody, 2007, pp. 40-41). Other examples of

pseudo-private spaces include moving from a public area to a more private space to conduct the attack. This was the case for Christine who was in a public park when a group of men tried to gang rape her. The setting is categorized as pseudo-private because the men carried her to a more private clearing, away from anyone who may have tried to stop them, before they began their assault (Christine, 2007, p. 26). A similar example is Kathy who was assaulted in the perpetrator's van in an empty Kmart parking lot. Kathy and the perpetrator had been at a high school party, but he took her to a more secluded place to try and assault her (Kathy, 2007, p. 55). As the narratives revealed, violence that took place in a pseudo-private space generally demonstrates the perpetrators' knowledge that what they are doing is wrong because they are attempting to hide their behavior from others. It also could show that there was more planning behind the attack, such as luring the victim away from a public space before using violence against her. The women's narratives showed that violence not only took place in public and pseudo-private spaces, that it also took place in the private sphere. This I turn to next.

Private spaces. The women's narratives revealed that the violence that took place within the private sphere could be quite emotionally devastating for victims because they lost all feelings of personal safety, even in their own home (i.e., their safe space). This was the case for all of the victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). Mara, Elizabeth, Elaine, Judy, Mandy, Peg, Carolee, Becky, Whitney, Andrea, Dawn, Jesusa, Lillia, and Maryellen were all abused by their husbands or boyfriends in their homes. This does not mean that the perpetrators did not use violence against them in public spaces as well. Elaine's abusive husband was mainly violent in private. Elaine grew accustomed to living a lie. Her husband never pushed, tripped, or slapped her in public. When they were in

public he would frame his taunts as nothing more than innocuous teasing (Elaine, 2004, p. 24). Jesusa's husband was also violent towards her in their home in Charleston, South Carolina, where she was thousands of miles away from her family in the Philippines who could have offered support and protection (Jesusa, 2004, p. 171). Another example of violence being committed in the private sphere is Abiola who was raped in her apartment after her neighbor's boyfriend helped carry her groceries up the stairs (Abiola, 2007, p. 23). The perpetrator violated Abiola and her "safe space" while Abiola continually blamed herself for overestimating the amount of groceries she could carry. For the victims who were mainly violated in the private sphere the violence seemed like something that was private and that they should not share it with others. These women were more likely to keep their victimization a secret. The narratives revealed that victims of IPV see the violence being inflicted on them in the private sphere as something that is their fault since it is happening in their home. Victims also talked about feeling responsible for their victimization because in their role as a wife or girlfriend they were supposed to keep their male partner happy. This sense of responsibility will be discussed further in Parts One and Two.

In sum, not only did the victim's narratives reveal that violence against women could occur anywhere or time, they also revealed that the violence was more than a simple act of aggression. Within the scenes, dramatis personae emerged including victims of violence, villains, and others. These will be outlined next beginning with the victims themselves.

Dramatis Personae

The dramatis personae are those involved in the action of the narratives. The victims' narratives revealed the following categories of dramatis personae: victims of violence, villains who in this narrative are the male perpetrators of violence, and the others (heroes and non-heroes). The characteristics and actions of each will be flushed out in the three-part narrative that follows. However, the characteristics of each are summarized below.

Victims of violence. The victims' characteristics, emotions, and motivations were pulled from their narratives and analyzed to determine how the victims saw themselves. Some women portrayed themselves with negative characteristics, such as stupidity, while others had a more positive outlook, using their victimization to help others or find strength, faith, and hope in themselves. The victims identified a range of emotions including anger, fear, hate, confusion, humiliation, shame, and embarrassment. Some victims of IPV mentioned the violence inflicted on them not being "as bad as it could be," which led the women to not identifying themselves as victims or their husbands as batterers. Not having the language or understanding of violence against women, particularly IPV was damaging to the women because what they were experiencing did not fit with common knowledge on the subject. The women also identified what motivated them to stay with their abusive partners, or get out of a violent situation or experience. The most prominent of these motivations being their explanations of why they stayed (or didn't leave) their batterer. The motivations are complicated and multi-faceted. The victims discussed the importance of their role as wife and mother as a leading motivator to not leaving an abusive partner. They relayed that the abuse was not

happening all the time, which made it harder to find a pattern and name their partner as abusive. Another factor that motivated some victims to stay with their abuser was self-blame. They felt they deserved what was happening to them for many different reasons, including trauma from childhood, their abuser telling them it was their fault, and their own interpretations based on their understanding of relationships and traditional sex roles. Equally insightful was how the victims described perpetrators of the violence. I turn to this theme next.

Villains. In these women's narratives the villains were the male perpetrators who inflicted violence on the victims. The victims' narratives exhibited similarities in the villains or perpetrators of violence against women. Though, ultimately the villains (like the victims) are a nonhomogenous group, their actions and relationships to their victims had parallels. One aspect that stood out in the victim narratives was that some perpetrators of IPV did not display any violence toward their significant other until after they were married. Another similarity among perpetrators was that most knew their victims; out of 22 narratives on the personal experiences of violence against women only one was committed by a complete stranger. For the victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), the perpetrators were the victims' significant others (i.e., their husbands or boyfriends). For victims of other types of violence against women, such as sexual assault, the perpetrators are strangers, acquaintances, family members, significant others, or authority figures.

The others: Heroes and non-heroes. The others are supporting dramatis personae in the narrative. They are divided into heroes and non-heroes. Heroes were dramatis personae the victim identified as providing aid and comfort during their time of

need. Their relationship with the victim was either personal (friend, family member) or professional (social worker, nurse, police, attorney). They provided support for getting out of an abusive relationship or violent situation, as well as helped with the healing process. A hero aided the victim emotionally, physically, or financially in a way the victim considered helpful. Emotional support was the most commonly mentioned by victims. Heroes provided emotional support through validating a victim's feelings, demonstrating that the woman is not alone in her victimization, providing comfort and hope for the victims, as well as aid in the women's healing process.

Dramatis personae were categorized as non-heroes based on their actions and reactions from the perspective of the victim. Non-heroes had a negative influence on the victims of violence. They include those dramatis personae who played an unsupportive role as well as those who were unaware of the influential role they played. Non-heroes may have tried to give support, but ultimately failed in the eyes of the victim. Actions that identified a dramatis personae as a non-hero were blaming the victim, not believing the victim about her experience, making her feel badly or guilty, aiding in her victimization, and judging the woman based on her experience. Non-heroes also include those dramatis personae who were unaware of their impact on the victim. Role model relationships were non-heroes discussed by victims who were unaware of the negative influence they had on the victims. They negatively influenced the way a victim made sense of her experiences. They did so by guiding the victims' understandings of relationship norms and gender roles.

Now that we have an understanding of the dramatis personae involved in the narratives, next I turn to an overview of the narrative arc that emerged from the victims'

stories. Part One tells the story of their victimization. This includes the violent acts the women suffered at the hands of the perpetrators, the way the women responded to that violence, and the factors they discussed that led them to have those responses. In Part Two, the victims come to the realization that they are not at fault for their victimization. They came to this realization in several ways, some victims noted an internal breaking point that shifted their mindset while others noted an external factor, such as a physical act or another person that encouraged them to change their understanding of their victimization. In Part Three the victims came to terms with their experience, modified their behaviors and were victims no more. This section details the repercussions and aftermath of the victimization. Repercussions included physical ailments, such as migraines, nightmares, and flashbacks; taking precautions to further avoid violence and victimization; distractions, such as work or drugs; a greater fear for personal safety; self-blaming; and issues with men or relationships. Victims told stories of starting over, rebuilding their lives, finding new hope, finally feeling safe, and realizing that they are not done healing as part of the aftermath of their experiences. Now I am going to take you through the narrative of victims, beginning with Part One and the violent acts the victims suffered at the hands of the perpetrators.

Part I.

Story of Victimization

As noted above the violence victims experienced took place anywhere and everywhere (public spaces, private spaces, and pseudo-private spaces). The victims of violence were met with acts of physical force, force framed as play, force with a weapon,

psychological abuse, isolation, control, stalking, sexual assault, and inhumane treatment. The victims of violence responded to and made sense of their victimization in several ways. Some victims looked to a role model relationship [non-heroes] as a way to understand the violence that was a part of their relationship. These non-heroes were unaware of the influence their relationship and behaviors would have on the victims of violence. Some victims mentioned never seeing violence in their home when they were growing up. As a result these women had no idea what to make of the violence in their own relationship. This led them to assume the violence was their fault. On the other end of the spectrum were those women who had grown up with violence in the household. These women saw the violence as normal in healthy relationships and were less likely to question the violence in their own relationships. While other victims did not use their role model relationship to make sense of the violence in their relationship, but in understanding their role as a woman and wife within the relationship. Not all women used a role model relationship to make sense of their victimization, some victims used the responses (or lack there of) from those who witnessed the violence, while others used their own knowledge and/or public discourse as a way to make sense of it. Regardless of how the victims made sense of the violence they faced, they all told stories of personal victimization.

Reader beware message: Since the goal of this thesis is to understand victims' experiences from their own perspectives this includes their need to describe the violence they experienced. As a result, the women's experiences discussed here, as elsewhere, uses their words as much as possible. Some of the women's experiences may be difficult

or distressing to read. Nonetheless they are recounted here as they described them because they are part of the larger narrative of violence against women.

Violent Acts

In the victims' narratives the perpetrators carried out "violent acts" categorized by the physical, emotional, and/or psychological harm they caused to victims. Victims noted acts of physical force, which in some cases increased after pregnancy; force with a weapon; force framed as play; sexual assault; emotional and psychological abuse, in which the perpetrator belittled the victim; as well as isolation, control, inhumane treatment, and stalking.

Force. Victims' narratives revealed several different kinds of force as violent acts they experienced. These included physical force, force framed as play, sexual assault, and inhumane treatment. I begin by outlining what the victims revealed about the physical force they suffered.

Physical force. Many of the victims' narratives identified physical force as a violent act they experienced. Victims described physical force as any action that caused or intended to cause bodily harm to the victim, though other types of violence such as psychological abuse often accompanied it. Lillia's husband Tony [perpetrator] began slapping her within a year of the marriage, but it only escalated, "I had bruises on my arms from where he'd hold on and shake me" Lillia recalled (Lillia, 2004, p. 183). As told by Weiss (2004), Tony would also "pull her around the house by her hair" and "drag her off the sofa when he caught her napping in the middle of the day" (Lillia, 2004, p. 183). Lillia described the embarrassment of her injuries from being beaten by her

husband, “Once I had a black eye, and I was so embarrassed I wouldn’t leave the house for two weeks. I told his mother and sister I had the flu” (Lillia, p. 183).

Similarly, Maryellen, was in a relationship in which her husband [Troy] used a great deal of physical force. Weiss (2004) relayed the physical injuries Maryellen suffered, “Troy [perpetrator] broke Maryellen’s arm. He broke her nose three times. He broke three of her teeth. He ripped out big chunks of her hair. He broke two of her ribs. He broke her toe. He ruptured one of her kidneys” (Maryellen, 2004, p. 198). Maryellen could sometimes tell when her abusive husband was about to be physically violent because he would get a certain look on his face; she remembered, “he had The Look on his face, and I knew he was about to hit me” (Maryellen, 2004, p. 198). Maryellen lived in constant fear during her marriage to her abuser (Maryellen, 2004, p. 197).

Other perpetrators had more conniving ways to cause physical pain to their victims. Whitney, for example, described her ex-boyfriend, Brad’s, use of physical force,

> I am allergic to pepper: it gives me hives and I can’t breathe. He would fry sausage with tons and tons of pepper. He’d say, ‘I know you’re hungry…eat this.’ Of course I was hungry! He had me on his diet, and I was starving. But I would tell him I couldn’t eat it, that I’d be really, really sick. He’d just stuff it into my mouth and laugh. One time I refused and he said, ‘Well, then, take the pan.’ The pan was hot and full of sausage grease; he swung it right at my head. That’s the day I got this scar on my chin. (Whitney, 2004, p. 123)

Brad was purposefully causing Whitney bodily harm by using what he had learned about her as a cruel form of punishment. Similarly, Jesusa listed behaviors her ex-husband [perpetrator] used to hurt her including, “slapping me, or choking me, or even putting a plastic bag on my face” (Jesusa, 2004, p. 169). Carolee described similar treatment, “once we got married he started with the slapping, the fighting, the shoving” (Carolee, 2004, p.

87). Similarly, other victims of IPV also noted changes in their partner from their courtship to their marriage.

Abuse began after marriage. Elaine's husband Melvin had never displayed violence toward her until after they were married. Melvin [perpetrator] was Elaine's college sweetheart, she recalled, "During our two-year courtship Melvin was tender and affectionate. He told me I was the most wonderful girl in the world" (Elaine, 2004, p. 22). It wasn't until after Elaine and Melvin were married that he became both physically and psychologically abusive. Another example is Jesusa. When Jesusa originally met Hank [perpetrator], he was stationed a few miles from the town where she lived in the Philippines. Weiss (2004) recalled what Jesusa told her about Hank when they first met, "She trusted him immediately because he exhibited the same gentleness she had seen in her father and her uncle" (Jesusa, 2004, p. 171). Jesusa and Hank were married and lived in the Philippines for a year until Hank's tour of duty was up. But when they returned to the United States Hank became physically and psychologically abusive. Jesusa recalled, "I told my husband he was like my father. But the first time he started putting his hand on my neck, he's not like my father. My father told us, 'Don't hit!' I say [*sic*] to Hank then, you're not like my father" (Jesusa, 2004, p. 171).

Violence in dating relationships. Though Hank waited until he and Jesusa were married and an ocean away from her support system to use violence toward her, not all perpetrators wait until they are married to abuse their partners. For example, Whitney's high school boyfriend abused her for the three years they dated. Weiss (2004) recalled what Whitney told her about the perpetrator, Brad, when they first met, "Brad was sixteen, a high school sophomore and the town catch. He was a football hero. He drove a

jet-black BMW convertible. He was the undisputed leader of Green Valley High School's coolest clique" (Whitney, 2004, p. 118). Whitney spent nearly all day getting ready for her first date with Brad. She heard his BMW pull up in front of her house, but instead of ringing the doorbell he honked his horn. "It felt more like a car pool than a first date, but I ran out the door and got in. Then the first thing he said to me was, 'Oh. Is *that* what you're gonna wear?' So I knew I had picked the wrong outfit, and I felt just awful" (Whitney, 2004, p. 119). Brad was abusive and controlling from the beginning. Whitney recounted their first date:

> He acted like he was taking me to the fanciest restaurant in town and you know where we ended up? Denny's! Then he told me I could order whatever I wanted, so I asked for fried chicken strips. But he said, 'You can't eat that! Look at you, you're so fat right now, that would only make it worse.' I had heard that sometimes on a date the guy will order for you, so I didn't like to argue with him. When the waitress came out he said, 'She wants a plain salad…just lettuce, don't put any dressing on it, no carrots, no cucumbers, just lettuce. And I want it in a really small bowl, don't bring her a big bowl.' Then he asked if I wanted anything to drink, I realized that it was more of a test, you know, and I was supposed to say no, but I asked for a root beer. He shook his head impatiently. 'No, you'll have water, and lots of it.' That was the start. From the very first time I went out with Brad, I was on his diet. They say you are what you eat, don't they? When I was dating him I guess I was a head of lettuce and a glass of water. (Whitney, 2004, pp. 119-120)

Brad needed complete control over Whitney throughout their relationship. He also used criticism and demeaning behavior to maintain power over her. Brad continued his criticism of Whitney throughout the rest of their three year relationship, "He [perpetrator] would tell me, 'You're not skinny enough. If you were skinnier, I wouldn't have to punish you.' So I'd try to get skinnier and skinnier and skinnier. But it was never enough…I had no shape at all. And even worse, I had no energy. It was like he was trying to make me disappear" (Whitney, 2004, p. 124).

Another example of a perpetrator who was abusive from the beginning is Dawn's husband, Randy [perpetrator]. Dawn was also a victim of IPV; her husband Randy [perpetrator] was the only son of a prominent ranching family. Dawn recalled that he was bright, articulate, a cowboy of sorts who drank heavily and hung with a crowd who experimented with drugs (Dawn, 2004, p. 148). Dawn also called Randy, "emotionally and verbally nasty" (Dawn, 2004, p. 148). He was abusive from the beginning, though he did escalate toward the end of the relationship when Dawn was pregnant by becoming physically violent toward her (Dawn, 2004, p. 148).

Increase in physical abuse during pregnancy. Other victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) also mentioned an increase in physical abuse during pregnancy; this is concurrent with past research (Walker, 1979, p. 105). Lillia, Dawn, and Peg all noted an increase in physical force during their pregnancies. Lillia's husband's "beatings became increasingly frequent and violent" during her pregnancy (Lillia, 2004, p. 183). Dawn's husband [perpetrator] had not used physical violence toward her before she became pregnant. "He [perpetrator] didn't change substantially until the end, when I was pregnant and he was violent physically" (Dawn, 2004, p. 148). Dawn recalled, "I was focused on myself for a change, and on the baby. I don't know how I raised his ire enough, but at one point he hit me. Hard. And that was the end" (Dawn, 2004, p. 153). Similarly, Peg was eight months pregnant with her second child when her husband [perpetrator] kicked her during an argument. "He [perpetrator] kicked me right in the ass. You know, when you're that pregnant, you've got a baby's head pressing down there pretty heavy duty" (Peg, 2004, p. 75).

Force framed as play. Another type of force discussed by the victims' narratives was force framed as play. As previously noted, Mollie was assaulted by her soccer counselor [perpetrator] at sports camp as a six-year old (Mollie, 2007, p. 20). Mollie described how the perpetrator used force framed as "play" to cause her harm. Mollie's sports camp counselor [perpetrator] had the group of young campers circle up and invited Mollie [victim] to join him in the center. He requested a kiss from Mollie for fixing her injured knee the day before. When Mollie responded to the perpetrator's request for a kiss by stating that kissing is gross, he enlisted the rest of the young campers help by asking if they thought he deserved a kiss. "Of course they screamed, 'Yes!'" (Mollie, 2007, p. 20). After he enlisted the children's support for a kiss she did not want to give the counselor told her to lie down. She wouldn't. The counselor pulled Mollie down into the grass with him in the middle of the group, she tried to roll away, but, "Two kids pushed me back to him" Mollie recalled (Mollie, 2007, p. 20). These other children played an active and unsupportive role in Mollie's victimization with the encouragement of the counselor. Mollie recalled what happened next:

> The counselor grabbed me, pulled my head to his, and kissed me. Forcing his tongue between my lips. I gagged and squirmed, It was awful. The kids laughed. I wet my pants. The counselor turned red, grabbed my arm, pinching the triceps between his thumb and forefinger, and dragged me to the side of the field. He told me to go home. To get some diapers. (Mollie, 2007, pp. 20-21)

In this case the other children played the role of non-heroes and added to Mollie's sense of victimization. The situation seemed like a game to the other kids, but in reality Mollie was very hurt and upset and their reaction only made the situation worse.

Sexual assault. Victims' narratives identified experiences of sexual assault as violent acts of aggression, force, or power used to violate a woman sexually. The most

common being rape. Abiola wrote about her own experience of sexual assault in the second person, as if almost trying to convince herself that it really happened: "[The perpetrator] smashes the spit out of you, stomps your thighs open & then bangs something molded and ugly into your flesh on the crimson crochet mat his girlfriend gave you for Kwanzaa" (Abiola, 2007, p. 24). The perpetrator used a knife to force Abiola to take her clothes off. Abiola recalled, "Your legs and hands do what he says because his dagger splits your tongue" (Abiola, 2007, p. 24). Betty recalled her experience of sexual violence and its consequences, "I was raped by a family friend at the young age of thirteen; I contracted VD as a result of that rape" (Betty, 2007, p. 17). Another victim, Jody, addressed the member of the death-squad who raped her as she recalled her victimization in El Salvador:

> Your [perpetrator] hate penetrates me and I endure, waiting for you to exit me and leave this room in your uncle's hotel. And when you finally do, I cannot tell if it has been a minute or an eternity, but I do note that there is no smirk of the sexual conqueror on your death-squad face as you snarl your parting shot: 'Watch out. I know who you are.' (Jody, 2007, p. 43)

Jody blamed herself and her decisions for her rape at the hands of a member of the death squad. Jody angrily called into question her own intelligence by going out to dinner with a man she barely knew. She wrote to herself, "If you never talk about it, no one can ever say, 'what the hell were you thinking when you made that stupid fucking decision" (Jody, 2007, p. 43).

One of the main examples of sexual violence from this selection of data came from Alice's detailed recounting of her brutal rape and its aftermath. The perpetrator used a knife to threaten Alice and force her to do what he said (Alice, 2007, p. 5). Alice's rapist forced her to kiss him (Alice, 2002, p. 7), take her clothes off (p. 8), and then told her to "Lie down" (Alice, 2002, p. 9). Alice recalled, "He pulled my underwear off me

roughly…He lay down on top of me and started humping" (Alice, 2002, p. 9). Alice attempted to recite poetry in her head while the perpetrator was on top of her. But something was still not working for the perpetrator, so he said to Alice, "Give me a blow job" (Alice, 2002, p. 11). Alice, being a virgin, didn't know how so the perpetrator ordered her to "Get back on the ground and do what I say" (p. 11). Alice did what the perpetrator said. She recalled, "He got hard enough and plunged himself inside me. He ordered me to and I wrapped my legs around his back and he drove me into the ground. I was locked on. All that remained unpossessed was my brain" (Alice, 2002, p. 11). During the attack Alice recalled, "a rush of fear ran through me. I knew I would die" (Alice, 2002, p. 6).

According to the victims' narratives, rape was not a necessary occurrence for an experience to be considered sexual violence. For example, Kathy was driven to an empty parking lot by Maurice [perpetrator] where he attempted to violate her sexually, but was ultimately unsuccessful.

> He turned off the engine and lunged in to kiss me…He kept wet-kissing when he lifted his whole body and put it right on top of mine. He was hugging and pushing on me and groping at my breasts, which were now way free of the halter…I kind of enjoyed the kissing and the boob stuff, but now his whole body was on top of mine…hard. I was squashed in the passenger seat—I couldn't even kiss anymore. I tried to find an empty airspace to breathe. He was heavy, humping on me, and then started to lift my dress up. (Kathy, 2007, p. 55)

At this point Kathy told Maurice to stop, that she didn't want to do this, but Maurice said it was too late. Kathy eventually was able to get herself out of the situation by opening the van door and letting him fall completely out onto the concrete parking lot.

The victims' narratives revealed that not all sexual violence happened outside the confines of a relationship. For example, while Carolee was in a relationship with her

husband [perpetrator], before they were married, he would force her to do sexual acts that she was not comfortable with. Carolee recalled, “I was very innocent. So when we were dating he would be forcing me into sexual things that I had never even heard of, and I’d be wondering, but who could you talk to about it? Certainly not the minister. You wouldn’t dare bring up such a subject.” (Carolee, 2004, p. 87). Dawn was also a victim of sexual violence in her abusive relationship.

> It was shortly after the affair ended that Dawn became pregnant. The act that led to conception was rape. There is no other word for it, though in those days no one believed that a rape could occur within the confines of marriage. Nevertheless, that was what it was: a husband arriving home drunk in the middle of the night, forcing himself on his unwilling wife. (Dawn, 2004, p. 152)

Sexual violence also occurred after a victim left her abuser. This was the case for Whitney, who was raped by her abusive ex-boyfriend the weekend after she had broken up with him (Whitney, 2004, p. 127).

The perpetrators of sexual assault are typically portrayed in news and popular culture discourse as strangers to their victims, but according to the victims’ narratives most perpetrators of sexual assault knew their victims in some way, making them acquaintances. This is concurrent with past research that has found most victims know their perpetrators (Cowan, 2000). Abiola was raped by an acquaintance, her “neighbor’s football-playing boyfriend” (Abiola, 2007, p. 22). Christine was victimized by a group of male acquaintances (Christine, 2007, p. 25). Similarly, Kathy was sexually assaulted by a guy she knew from high school (Kathy, 2007, pp. 53-56). Finally, Jody was raped by a young Salvadorian member of the “death-squad” with whom she had gone to dinner (Jody, 2007, pp. 40-43).

Contradictory to representations in news and popular culture only one narrative in this thesis revealed a case of violence against women committed by a stranger. Alice was raped by a stranger, Gregory Madison [perpetrator]. In her narrative, Alice called him "the rapist" until she saw him in October and learned his name (Alice, 2002, p. 102). She described him as cocky and brazen enough to approach her on the street months after the rape. Alice recalled her rapist approaching her, "'Hey, girl,' he said. 'Don't I know you from somewhere?' he smirked at me, remembering" (Alice, 2002, p. 103). As he walked away Alice heard him laughing,

> He had no fear. It had been nearly six months since we'd seen each other last. Six months since I lay under him in a tunnel on top of a bed of broken glass. He was laughing because he had gotten away with it, because he had raped before me, and because he would rape again. My devastation was a pleasure for him. He was walking the streets, scot-free. (Alice, p. 103)

As Alice walked away she saw her rapist walk up to a police officer. Alice recalled, "Over my shoulder I saw him walking up to the redheaded policeman. He was shooting the breeze, so sure of his safety that he felt comfortable enough, right after seeing me, to tease a cop" (Alice, 2002, p. 104).

Inhumane treatment. Victims' narratives also revealed acts of inhumane treatment as violence used against them by the perpetrators. Though most, if not all, of the violent acts could be considered a form of inhumane treatment, this category specifically details acts of a bizarre or vengeful nature, as well as treatment of the victims like animals or property. One example of this type of violence took place in Sudan, where the victim [unnamed] and her sisters were treated like animals and property by the perpetrators. The *murahaleen* [perpetrators] came to their house and took the five sisters from their mother. "They told my mother that they had been told by Bashir that all Dinka girls were to be

impregnated with Muslim babies and they were doing their duty" (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 34). The victim recalled what her and her sisters experienced: "They tied our hands and tied us to one another and we waited in a cattle pen until the next morning, when they were to take us north" (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 34). The girls were forced to walk, and would be poked by the swords of the guards on horseback when they walked too slowly (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 34). The perpetrators treated the girls as if they were their property, even selling several of the girls when they stopped in an Arab town (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 35). Similarly, Whitney relayed her experience being treated like property by her abusive boyfriend through deliberate mutilation:

> He's a lot bigger and stronger than me. He would hold my two wrists in his left hand so I couldn't get away. Then he'd scratch his name on different parts of my body. That was his big thing: to claim me as his property. I'm sure if I had been old enough, he would have taken me to a tattoo parlor and had them tattoo his name on me. Thank God you have to be eighteen in this state! But it's sad: even though I finally got him out of my life, I'm left with all these scars. I'm so afraid that when I finally do get married, my husband will ask me why I have this other man's name all over my body. It's his full name, Bradley Willis Christiansen, right across my inner thighs. I hate it that Brad will always have his name on me, like I'm still his property, like he's still here. I hate that worst of all. (Whitney, 2004, p. 124)

Another example of inhumane treatment took place during Alice's rape. Disgusted at her for being a virgin, and not knowing how to please him sexually, the perpetrator urinated on Alice. She described what happened and "The smell of him — the fruity, heady, nauseating smell — clung to my skin" (Alice, 2002, p. 11).

Another victim who noted inhumane treatment by the perpetrator was Judy. Judy was left with concerns for her personal safety after allowing her husband Karl [perpetrator] to move back in. Karl and Judy began seeing a marriage counselor, but

within a few weeks Judy knew that she had made a terrible mistake in letting him move back in. Karl was not interested in making their marriage work, he just wanted to make Judy pay for her defiance.

> The abuse started again, each act more bizarre than the last. He threw her students' homework papers into a snow bank. He smeared peanut butter in her hair. Driving home from one of their therapy sessions, he reached across her to the passenger door, released the latch, and tried to push her out of the car. (Judy, 2004, p. 40)

They were going fast enough that Judy could have been killed if she hadn't been wearing her seat belt. Similarly, an act of violence took place while Gregg [perpetrator] and Andrea were on their honeymoon in Hawaii. They were sitting across from each other at an elegant restaurant drinking coffee and sharing dessert. As noted earlier, "Without warning, Gregg picked up his cup of coffee and, with a quick flick of his wrist, sent the scalding liquid flying across the table" (Andrea, 2004, p. 138). Andrea recalled this experience and how it left her feeling: "I remember feeling the hot coffee splash on my chest and Gregg saying, 'Oh my God, Andrea…how did you spill that on you, are you all right?' And I thought I was crazy. I really thought I was crazy" (Andrea, 2004, p. 138).

Psychological abuse. Not all violent acts harmed the victim physically. Weiss (2004) uses the term "'psychological abuse' to describe the entire range of behaviors — criticism, teasing, sarcasm, swearing, threats, accusations, jealousy, and isolation, among others — employed by an abuser to diminish his victim" (p. 80). These behaviors also worked to give the perpetrator power over his victim by his continual weakening/wearing down of her self-esteem and psyche. Peg's abusive husband, Ira [perpetrator] used any opportunity to put her down, while subsequently raising himself up. On their first date, Ira wanted to go to a play, while Peg wanted to see a recently released movie. Ira agreed to Peg's choice, but he never let her live it down.

> Months later, he would manage to weave her faux pas into the fabric of their conversations…particularly when those conversations took place in front of an appreciative audience of Ira's friends. What a child she had been, picking Robert Redford over Samuel Becket! He could see that she had a lot to learn. He could see that he was going to have to teach her the difference between True Culture and mass market schlock. (Peg, 2004, p. 70)

Peg admired Ira for his talent, creativity, and sophistication when they first met in college. And Ira was always willing to instruct Peg, though his lessons would leave her feeling even more unsure of herself than before. Peg recalled, "In the three years we were dating, he never actually came right out and called me stupid. But he knew that's what I was most afraid of" (Peg, 2004, p. 70). Ira [perpetrator] worked to put Peg down and make her feel badly about herself and her deepest insecurities. Doing so made Peg even more dependent on her relationship to the perpetrator, as she had been made to feel inadequate on her own.

Threats. Victims' narratives also discussed threats as psychological abuse used by perpetrators. For example, three weeks after Becky's son Ben was born, she proposed a trip to her parents' house for the weekend that she secretly hoped to turn into a permanent separation. Weiss (2004) writes about Leonard's response toward Becky's proposed trip:

> Leonard seemed able to read her mind. She could go, he warned ominously, but she'd better be back by Sunday night. 'Because if you don't, you're not the only one who's gonna get hurt.' Though Leonard wasn't specific, Becky understood his veiled threat. Becky's youngest sister Tracey is mentally retarded; she was seven at the time, and completely defenseless. Anyone who knew Becky knew that Tracey was her weak spot. Whenever Leonard expressed his intention to make someone else pay for Becky's behavior, he always specifically mentioned her sister. (Becky, 2004, p. 103)

The threat left Becky worrying about the safety of her younger sister to the point of being unable to also worry about her own personal safety. Becky's husband [perpetrator] continued with his threats as their son got older, she recalled, "He said that I wasn't a

proper mother for his son. That he was gonna take Ben away from me and hide him in a place I'd never find him" (Becky, 2004, p. 104). Again Becky's husband used threats to keep her scared and maintain power over her. Similarly, Jesusa's husband used manipulation to deceive and threaten her. "Jesusa's husband, an ex-Marine, is an American citizen. Jesusa is a citizen as well, but she was born in the Philippines. Hank [perpetrator] threatened to have her deported if she took the boys [their sons] to the shelter and she, unfamiliar with naturalization laws, believed he had the power to do so" (Jesusa, 2004, p. 168). Hank [perpetrator] used his knowledge and citizenship to manipulate Jesusa, maintain his power over her, and keep her from being his equal, even after their relationship was over.

Just as Jesusa's and Becky's abusive husbands sought out their weaknesses to use against them, Peg's husband used her insecurity regarding her intelligence to belittle her. Peg recalled, "He really sensed that I was afraid of being stupid. It was my weak spot. So he tried to drive that one home. 'You're so stupid…you don't know *that*? I can't believe you don't know that. You're just…I can't *believe* you're that stupid. I just can't *believe* it.' Da, da, da…on and on and on" (Peg, 2004, p. 74). With the constant berating from her husband, coupled with her own insecurities, it was far easier for Peg to believe Ira's putdowns as opposed to the reality that he was a batterer. Carolee's abusive husband [Frank] also had a favorite putdown:

> Dumb fucking fascist pig…That was his nickname for me. That was what he called me, whenever I made a mistake. Then I was a dumb fucking fascist pig. When we were out in public around the army base, or in front of officers, he would just smile at me and whisper DFFP. Folks probably thought it was a little pet name, but I knew what he meant. (Carolee, p. 87)

By continually using cutting remarks the perpetrators were attempting to maintain power over their victims. In public, though Frank's language was edited, the perpetrator was

threatening Carolee, who knew she had done something "wrong" and would be in trouble when they were alone.

Lillia's husband Tony [perpetrator] used a weapon, his pistol, as a means of threatening Lillia and causing her psychological and emotional trauma. Tony would calmly and precisely take apart his gun and methodically clean it piece by piece until it gleamed. "Then he would reassemble the weapon, put one bullet in the chamber and point the barrel at Lilia's head. Sometimes he would pull the trigger, laughing at the harmless click as the hammer encountered an empty chamber" (Lillia, 2004, p. 184). Lillia recalled, "Each time, I was sure I was going to die. After a while, I wished I would. I just wanted him to kill me and get it over with" (Lillia, 2004, p. 184). Lillia was not the only one who Tony threatened to harm with his pistol. When Lillia asked Tony for a divorce he slowly and precisely cleaned his pistol, then instead of pointing the gun at Lillia, he went over to their one-year-old daughter's crib, picked her up and pointed the pistol at her head. Weiss (2004) tells further of Lillia's experience:

> 'Now I want you to tell me again,' he said with icy calm, 'that you want a divorce.' Lillia fell at his feet and begged. She would do anything he wanted, she said. Anything. She would stay with him forever. She would never divorce him. She babbled whatever words she had to say, until he slowly lowered the pistol. (Lillia, 2004, p. 185)

Lillia recalled the experience, "The minute I saw him holding a gun to that little girl's head, that was it. When he did that, it was…I'm not gonna *ask* him for a divorce. I'm gonna *get* one" (Lillia, p. 185).

Control. As the victims' narratives revealed, one of the major objectives of perpetrators of IPV is gaining or maintaining control over their victims. For example, Carolee was only allowed to drive to the supermarket and back after her husband [perpetrator] had moved them to a sparsely populated area in the Upper Peninsula of

Michigan. Her husband [perpetrator] would scrutinize the odometer and he kept her too poor to leave him.

> It was demeaning. Like, I would go to the store and come back and he would weigh the grapes. I'll never forget him weighing the grapes. He'd say, 'What did you do, eat some grapes? Let me see your mouth.' Because if I didn't give him the exact right change back, he would think that I was keeping money. (Carolee, 2004, p. 91)

He [perpetrator] had complete financial control now that he was no longer allowing Carolee to work. Concurrent with past research (Enander, 2010) some victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) called themselves stupid. For example, Carolee referred to herself as being stupid by not knowing she could question or stand up to her controlling and abusive husband. Carolee said she was "too stupid to tell him to blow it out his ass" (Carolee, 2004, p. 90).

Lillia's husband Tony [perpetrator] also needed complete control over his victim, which was exemplified by him not allowing Lillia to grieve after her mother died. Lillia had been very close to her mother who died shortly after Lillia moved to Memphis. Lillia recalled, "After her [mother's] death, if I cried or if I was somber he'd say, 'What's wrong with you?' I'd say, 'I just miss my mother,' and he'd say, 'Well, you know, you've done enough grieving and it's time for you to go on with your life,'" (Lillia, 2004, pp. 182-3). Lillia's work as a victim advocate taught her that this is not uncommon behavior for an abuser. As told by Weiss (2004), "Tony, like all abusive men, had to know that he had Lillia's full attention at all times. He could not tolerate the possibility that she cared for, thought about, anyone other than him" (Lillia, 2004, p. 183). Similarly, Becky's abusive husband also had issues with jealousy and needing her full attention, which he dealt with by trying to control her.

> It began with makeup. Why was she wearing all that stuff on her face? Becky was confused. She had been wearing makeup since she was ten. 'It was the sixties. It was California. My girlfriends and I were into heavy mascara, lots of eyeliner, tons of foundation. It was the style, and besides, I liked it. So I didn't pay any attention to him.' And then one day Leonard pushed her against the wall. Hadn't he asked her politely to stop wearing makeup? If she wasn't wearing it for him, who was she wearing it for? (Becky, 2004, p. 102)

As revealed in the victim narratives, another way perpetrators exerted control was through public humiliation. Whitney recalled an example of this after shopping with Brad for her costume for their school's annual Halloween dance:

> We went to the thrift store and he picked out the biggest outfit they had. The pants were too big even for my dad. The shirt and jacket were enormous. When I put everything on I just looked obese. And I was so confused…why would he dress me like that? Why? I didn't get it. All night at the dance he was, like, 'Don't eat that, pudgy!' He teased me at the table when the whole group of us went out to dinner: 'Look at her just eating lettuce, trying to get skinny, hee hee hee!' (Whitney, 2004, p. 121-2)

Brad never let Whitney catch her footing, he kept her constantly on-guard. While true focus was on keeping the victims on unsteady ground. Whitney recalled feeling confused, "I was starving, he was telling me I was fat, and then he was criticizing me for dieting. I didn't know what I was supposed to do" (Whitney, 2004, p. 122).

Isolation. Victims' narratives also described forced isolation by the perpetrator as an act of violence. Victims identified isolation as physical, geographic isolation or employing manipulation to force dependence on the victim's relationship with her abuser. The latter was the case for Judy when her husband, Karl [perpetrator], drove a wedge between her and her parents. Judy described Karl's manipulation: "He'd criticize things they did. And he'd be sure to pick things that bothered me about them, too. So then I'd think, well, yeah, he's right. And I'd start to be mad at them" (Judy, 2004, p. 35). Karl took his manipulation even further when Judy gave birth to her daughter Cyndi. Karl

purposefully did not call Judy's parents to tell them they had a granddaughter, and when her parents did find out they had no way of knowing that Judy had nothing to do with not telling them. "It was two days before [Judy's mother] came to visit Judy in the hospital. By the time she arrived, mother and daughter were furious with each other. Each felt betrayed…It dawned on neither of them that the betrayal was Karl's" (Judy, 2004, p. 35). In an example of physical isolation, Carolee's husband [perpetrator] moved their family to the outskirts of a sparsely populated town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "She had neither a car nor any other means of transportation; unlike Chicago, there were no bus lines. She also had no job. In Germany and Chicago, work had been a refuge, a place where she was respected" (Carolee, 2004, p. 91). But after the move Carolee had no one to rely on for support except her batterer. Similarly, Dawn experienced extreme isolation while she was married to an abusive partner; she had no personal friends and no sort of support system when she moved to Montana with Randy [perpetrator]. Dawn recalled how isolated she felt in Montana:

> Here I was in the middle of Montana. My husband's family was enormously wealthy: they basically owned the town. The ranching community was so connected and so closed that I was very much an outsider. I just worked and I was a wife. I developed no personal friendships…I don't think I had a single woman friend. I had no support. (Dawn, 2004, p. 150)

Dawn was constantly committed to her role as a supportive wife, even moving to her husband's hometown and catering to his needs without the hope of having her own met. Dawn took her marriage commitment seriously, a motivation that led her to stay with her abusive husband, Randy [perpetrator]: "I took seriously my marriage vows. So, really, I didn't think about getting out. I assumed this was what I had to do. This was the way it was" (Dawn, 2004, pp. 150-151). Another motivating factor that led Dawn to stay with

Randy [perpetrator] was her concern for him. Dawn feared that Randy would follow through with his threat of suicide if she left him. She was concerned for his safety before her own (Dawn, 2004, p. 151). Similarly, Andrea was motivated to stay with her husband [perpetrator] by putting his personal well-being before her own. Andrea knew that Gregg [perpetrator] needed help, and she, being a doctor, was in the helping profession. She had married this man and could not allow herself to ignore her vows or his need (Andrea, 2004, pp. 138-9).

Stalking. Victims, as well as scholars who discuss violence against women, consider stalking, particularly after a victim has left an abusive relationship, a violent act. After Lillia left Tony [perpetrator] he "stalked her, appearing unannounced in the restaurant where she waited tables, lingering in the parking lot of the grocery store where she did her marketing" (Lillia, p. 187). Though Lillia never felt in any real danger at the time, in her later work with victims of violence against women she learned the statistics, she said, "Ignorance is bliss, I guess. I'm almost glad I didn't know how many women like me get killed after they leave" (Lillia, p. 187). Whitney was also stalked by her abusive ex-boyfriend after she left him. Brad [perpetrator] had a sign he would leave to let Whitney know he had been there, or was watching her.

> I don't know why he chose a triangle, but he used to leave things of mine in the shape of a triangle to let me know that he'd been there. Like he'd sneak into my house and he'd move my bed and my dresser and my couch into a triangle in the middle of my room. Or he'd do it with my damp clothes in the girl's locker room where, of course, men aren't allowed, so I'd know he was around somewhere, watching me. (Whitney, p. 126)

Stalking, though a physical act, was quite psychologically harmful to the victims. The perpetrators used stalking to demonstrate their presence and display an air of dominance

and control over the victims. In some cases stalking left the victim feeling as if there was no place they were truly safe or away from the perpetrator.

Blamed. Victims also discussed being blamed for their own victimization as psychological abuse. Both Carolee and Andrea were blamed by the perpetrators for their own abuse. Carolee's husband made it clear that she was to blame after every one of his acts of violence. She recalled, "If only the house had been tidier when he came home from one of his tours. If only the checkbook had been balanced properly. If only there had been a full tank of gas in the car. If only Bobby [their son] had been freshly bathed and in pajamas" (Carolee, 2004, p. 87). Similarly, Andrea's husband [perpetrator] also "managed to subtly convey that she was to blame: that she had pushed his buttons until he had no choice but to explode" (Andrea, 2004, p. 139). For some women being blamed for their own victimization caused them to try and make sense of the violence they were experiencing; this was often made more complicated because of their relationship with the perpetrator.

Making Sense of Violence

For victims of IPV the perpetrator was someone with whom the victim was in an intimate relationship. This made identifying that person as a perpetrator (or batterer) more difficult for the women. Maryellen, for example, was abused by her husband, but she still considered him a good man because she did not solely focus on his abusive behavior. Maryellen recalled, "He was a very loving man. He had a good job, he was always there, he really tried to provide for the three of us [Maryellen, Troy, and daughter Sophie]" (Maryellen, 2004, p. 195). According to Maryellen, Troy [perpetrator] originally had embraced fatherhood when their daughter was born, but everything

changed when he turned twenty-one. Maryellen never figured out why, “I don’t know what it was…I’m not sure if he was seeing another woman, or if he just got tired of me” (Maryellen, 2004, p. 195). Even as the abuse worsened Maryellen focused on the positive aspects of her husband, such as his being a good financial provider for her and her young daughter, “He was still what I considered to be a good man. I used to tell myself that he just had these unusual tendencies to want to hit me” (Maryellen, 2004, p. 197). Like many perpetrators described in the narratives, Troy did not become abusive until after he and Maryellen were married. Similarly, Lillia was abused by her husband, though again not until after they were married. Lillia recalled, “My ex-husband, the perpetrator, was a salesman. He went all around the South doing trade shows” (Lillia, 2004, p. 181). Tony met Lillia when he was in Atlanta for a trade show, just around the corner from where she ran an art gallery. While Tony was in town he relentlessly stopped by the gallery where she worked. Lillia recalled,

> Through the whole show, he kept asking me to go out with him, and I kept sayin’ no…no…no…no…no…No! I had just broken up from a relationship of three years, and I had no desire to go out with this man. Finally on the last day of the show he asked me out again, and I thought, okay, well, he’s gonna go, he’s leaving tomorrow, so I went out with him. (Lillia, 2004, p. 181)

When Tony left Atlanta and was back in Memphis he began calling Lillia multiple times a day. Tony was persistent, he wanted Lillia to marry him,

> I kept saying: ‘No, Tony! I don’t even know you!’ I was happy with my life in Atlanta. I was content, I was very self-confident, I thought I was really something special. But he kept asking me to marry him, calling me all day long. I couldn’t even put the phone down at my apartment. As soon as I’d put the phone down it would ring again and, you know, it was him. (Lillia, 2004, p. 182)

After thirteen days of unrelenting phone calls Lillia agreed to marry Tony. Lillia recalled the suddenness, “And the next thing I know, I’m in the car with my sister, being driven to

the airport, on my way to Memphis to get married. And I can remember feeling like I was in some kind of a fog and thinking: Oh gosh, I'm so crazy…why am I doing this?" (Lillia, 2004, p. 182). He was persistent, he wore her down until she couldn't say no anymore, though he had not exhibited, in Lillia's mind, any signs of abuse. Once Tony and Lillia were married, his need for control became evident. When Lillia moved to Memphis to marry Tony he did not want her to work, as he said he made plenty of money to support them, and all she had to do was ask if she wanted anything (Lillia, 2004, p. 182). Within a year of their marriage Tony became physically violent toward Lillia (Lillia, 2004, p. 183).

Victim narratives revealed their belief that the violence in their relationship was "not as bad as it could be" as another difficulty in identifying the perpetrator's behaviors as abusive. This is concurrent with past findings in which victims of IPV identified feeling as if the violence they experienced was not bad enough to constitute labeling it as abuse or battering (Wood, 2001; Enander, 2010). For example, Elaine's husband [perpetrator] punched her, threw her on the ground and choked her, but "at least he never gave me a black eye or a broken arm" said Elaine (Elaine, 2004, p. 23). Peg's husband, Ira [perpetrator], was never violent enough to cause severe injuries to her (Peg, 2004, p. 73). Because of the lack of severe injuries Peg had difficulty determining what constituted violence, as well as identifying herself as a victim. Enander (2010) had a similar finding; in her study she found some women did not label their victimization within their relationship as intimate partner violence (IPV). Judy (2004) also did not label herself as a victim of domestic violence. Elaine, similarly, recalled, "It was many years before…I named what had happened to me, before I understood that I had been a battered

wife" (Elaine, 2004, p. 28). For Elaine the lack of vocabulary surrounding her experience was troublesome. Elaine explained the mindset during the time she was married, "I was married in 1967; the term 'domestic violence' didn't exist. No one thought to join these two words, since no one accepted that domestic violence happened" (Elaine, 2004, p. 21). This led Elaine to feel she had nowhere to go for support; she feared she would not be believed (Elaine, 2004). In addition to having trouble labeling their victimization, non-heroes also played a role in influencing how victims made sense of their experiences.

Influence of non-heroes. Victims' narratives revealed that "other" dramatis personae were a main source for understanding the violence they experienced. Some victims relied on role model relationships [non-heroes] to make sense of the violence they experienced. These non-heroes were unaware of the influence their relationship and behaviors had on the victims. On one hand are those women who grew up in violent households. These women normalized violence and were less likely to question it in their own relationships. On the other hand are the victims who noted never seeing violence until it was used against them. These women had no idea what to make of the violence in their own relationship, which led many to assume the violence was their fault. Still other victims used role model relationships to understand their role as a woman and wife within the relationship.

Normalized violence. According to the victims' narratives, women who grew up with violence in their households saw violence as normal in healthy relationships. For example, Dawn had never seen a marriage that contradicted her assumption that violence was a normal part of relationships. "When I think about where I came from, and the abuse that was in my family of origin, this marriage was actually better than the home

that I had left" (Dawn, 2004, pp. 148-149). Dawn's adoptive father sexually molested her from the time she was a toddler until she left for college, while her adoptive mother ignored the abuse that she felt powerless to stop. According to Dawn, her husband had also come from a violent household. "His dad was terribly mean to his mother. And his mother was an alcoholic. So, with them as my model, it wasn't any worse than what was happening to me" (Dawn, 2004, p. 151). Dawn had never seen a relationship without violence, so she did not think twice about the abuse she was experiencing in her marriage.

No context for violence. On the other end of the spectrum were those victims who mentioned never seeing violence in their home growing up. Along with not having the language to identify herself as a victim of domestic violence, Elaine was raised in a loving family, with parents who were loyal and supportive of each other. She assumed that because her marriage did not look like her parents' that it must be her fault. "My only experience of marriage was the years I had spent growing up in my parent's home, where I saw warmth, kindness, and love. If my marriage looked nothing like theirs, I assumed that I must have been doing something wrong. And, of course, that's what Melvin kept telling me" (Elaine, 2004, p. 22). Having never witnessed violence in a relationship and having no such term as "domestic violence" Elaine made sense of her husband's behaviors as best she could. Unfortunately, violent behavior is not always predictable and does not make sense. So Elaine's understanding of relationships and her loyalty to her husband led her to believe the violence was her fault and she had control over it. Also by blaming herself for the problems she saw in her marriage, Elaine demonstrated her more

traditional views of sex roles, such as it being a woman's job to make a relationship work and last.

Judy, like Elaine, used her parents' relationship to try to make sense of the violence she experienced within her own marriage, "I did not see my dad being mean to my mom or my mom being mean to my dad. So when all this happened to me, I just didn't know what to think. I was really taken aback" (Judy, 2004, p. 34). Similarly, Carolee, having no context for violence experienced confusion,

> I had never seen men shout or be aggressive or be assertive to the point where you had to do what they said you had to do. I didn't know anything about that. So I never did learn to verbally defend myself in a fight or say, 'What are you talking about?' or 'How dare you?' I didn't have much backbone — I didn't know that I *could* have backbone! Frank [perpetrator] was mean and he was demanding and I didn't have a clue that it was out of the ordinary, except I thought…if this is what marriage is all about, I sure don't like this. (Carolee, 2004, p. 88)

With no prior experiences with violence, Elaine, Judy, and Carolee were left trying to make sense of their husbands' behaviors. None had witnessed violent or aggressive behaviors in their homes growing up, nor, at the time, was there much discussion about domestic violence. So instead of immediately reacting to the violence, they first tried to make sense of it.

Learned gender roles. Some victims' narratives revealed non-heroes as being influential in understanding their role as a woman and wife within their relationship. This was the case for Becky. Becky was not raised in an abusive home, but was raised in a patriarchal household (Becky, 2004, p. 102). Becky described how her father ran his household, "He would work all day. Then he would come home, sit in his chair, smoke his cigar, read his book, and play with the dog (but never us kids). Meanwhile, my mother would do everything for him" (Becky, 2004, p. 102). Her parent's relationship

instilled in Becky a traditional view of gender roles. Becky expected to become a wife and mother and take care of her husband, family, and the household. This led Becky to prioritize the importance of finding a husband. She was pregnant and married to Leonard (ten years her senior) at age 20. Though holding traditional gender roles in no way makes a woman more vulnerable to victimization, as prior research indicates it can cause a woman to put more value on her role as a wife and mother before her own personal well-being (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

Maryellen was too ashamed to admit to her parents that her husband was hitting her. They had raised her to believe it was a wife's duty to make her husband happy (Maryellen, p. 196). According to Weiss (2004) Maryellen felt like she had to keep her abuse hidden, "Telling the truth never felt like an option; to admit that her husband beat her would have let everyone know she was a fraud and a failure" (Maryellen, p. 198). Maryellen believed this because of the traditional gender roles her parents [non-heroes] inculcated in her growing up by denouncing her lifelong dream of becoming a doctor and instead pushing her to become a wife (Maryellen, 2004, p. 194). Maryellen's "parents made it very clear that little girls didn't grow up to be doctors. They grow up to be wives and mothers" (Maryellen, p. 192). Her parents continually let her know that after graduating high school marriage was the logical next step. According to Weiss (2004), "The refrain of her parents' message echoed through the house so frequently that it eventually became her own melody. At seventeen she longed desperately for a husband. Unmarried, she would be a failure" (Maryellen, p. 194). Her parents' obsessive focus on marriage and a woman's role strictly as wife and mother led Maryellen to also place her role as wife and mother as central to her identity and as the main determinant of her

success or failure. When her husband, Troy, became violent several years into their marriage Maryellen thought that she must surely be at fault. “A wife’s job is to make her husband happy; if Troy was unhappy, she simply had to think of ways to make him happier” (Maryellen, p. 196). Maryellen used what she had learned from her parents to make sense of what was happening to her as well as how she should handle it.

Self-blame. Similarly to Maryellen, Elaine recalled one of the reasons she didn’t leave the perpetrator sooner was because of self-blame; “I didn’t leave…because I thought it was my fault” (Elaine, 2004, p. 22). Elaine blamed the abuse on herself in part because Melvin [perpetrator] would tell her it was her fault, but also because she had no context to understand the violence being inflicted on her. Her parents were warm, kind, and loving to each other, so she assumed that because her marriage did not look like theirs that she, as a wife, was doing something wrong. There were many motivations that led Elaine to not leave the perpetrator sooner; lack of support, not having language to discuss what was happening to her, but also believing that the abuse was her fault. This was also the case for Peg, who blamed herself the first time her husband [perpetrator] hit her. Peg recalled, “I had been drinking at the time, and I was sure that if I hadn’t been drinking and sort of acting out or mouthing off, that he would have never touched me” (Peg, 2004, p. 73). According to their narratives, both Peg’s and Elaine’s abusive husbands wanted their wives/victims to blame themselves for the abuse they inflicted. At the time, these women were too close to see the deliberate manipulation that the perpetrators were inflicting while they were in the relationship.

Maryellen is another victim who blamed herself for her husband’s violence. The self-blame Maryellen experienced during her abusive marriage was in part due to the

traditional gender roles her parents had inculcated, but also patterned on trauma she experienced as a child. Maryellen's mother experienced severe seasonal depression; she tried to kill herself about once a year while Maryellen was growing up. Weiss (2004) explains how Maryellen interpreted her mother's behavior, "Maryellen was convinced that she, and she alone, was responsible for her mother's unhappiness" (Maryellen, 2004, p. 193). Maryellen was five years old when her mother snapped for the first time. This was when the pattern began of Maryellen taking on the responsibility for someone else's unhappiness, which she continued to do in her abusive marriage to Troy [perpetrator]. Self-blame often led the victims of violence to feel embarrassed or ashamed.

Victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) were not the only victims who blamed themselves for their abuse. Victims of sexual assault also dealt with feelings of self-blame. This was the case for Christine, who had self-blaming thoughts while she was being sexually assaulted. She thought to herself, "Face it. You put yourself here. This is the end of the road you chose. You were asking for it. You deserve this. Endure it. Get through it. Get over it" (Christine, 2007, p. 26). Christine's self-blame was an attempt to make herself survive the sexual assault she was experiencing. But she soon realized it was something she would not get over; Christine recalled, "But I knew. In my soul I knew that I would not get over this. I felt the regret of knowing my life would end this night" (Christine, 2007, p. 26). These thoughts were what spurred Christine on to fight for her life:

> I decided then that if my life ended in these woods, it would not be because I couldn't emotionally survive being gang-raped. That was too weak. If my life ended here in these woods, it would be because I fought to the death *not* to be gang-raped. That was a death I could live with (so to speak). (Christine, 2007, p. 27)

Though Christine's self-blaming thoughts began as self-deprecating they spurred her on to fight for her survival.

Witnesses [non-heroes]. Victims' narratives revealed another way they made sense of their victimization was through dramatis personae who witnessed or were told about an act of violence. Non-heroes were dramatis personae who responded unsupportively when they witnessed or were told about an act of violence. According to the victims' narratives, by allowing violence to take place without comment the silent witnesses were aiding in the woman's victimization. As discussed earlier, as Whitney and Brad stood in line at a local movie theater disputing which movie they were going to see Brad backhanded Whitney so hard that she was knocked to the ground. Even though there was a crowd of several hundred people around and many of them knew both Brad and Whitney, no one said or did anything. The silence was Whitney's answer. The lack of response made Whitney believed she was the only one who had a problem with Brad's behavior (Whitney, 2004, p. 126). Whitney was met with a similar response from Brad's father while she was over at Brad's house. Brad pushed Whitney and she fell all the way down the stairs, landing awkwardly on her wrist. Brad and his father watched her fall silently, then as Whitney was laying on the ground not knowing what to do, Brad's father said, "It's okay isn't it?" "Get up. Show me" (Whitney, 2004, p. 125). She told him that she thought it might be broken. "Mr. Christiansen roughly forced her hand back and forth. 'No, you're fine. If it was broken I couldn't move it like this. See? It's nothing to make a big deal over" (Whitney, 2004, p. 125). Whitney thought that maybe it was not such a big deal, since Brad's father was not acting like this was anything out of the ordinary. As the narratives revealed, not responding when witnessing an act of violence

was a response to the victim. Not responding demonstrated to the victim that the abuse was acceptable, no one had a problem with it, and it was just a part of life that she needed to deal with. Most would find this behavior to be shocking and horrifying so the lack of reaction of Mr. Christiansen and the crowd at the movie theater to the violence they witnessed led Whitney to believe that they did not.

Two victims' narratives disclosed that marriage counselors [non-heroes] aided in their victimization by giving unsupportive and ultimately dangerous advice. A marriage counselor acted as a non-hero in validating Elaine's husband's abusive behavior and aiding in her victimization.

> The psychiatrist insisted that I was morally obligated to stay in the marriage because my husband couldn't function without me. He also lectured me about my own contribution to what he termed 'your marital fight': I had to stop being my father's Little Girl and become my husband's Adult Wife, become the sort of woman Melvin would want to treat well. Since this advice came from a physician, I assumed it must be correct. (Elaine, 2004, p. 24)

Similarly, Judy's therapist advised her to fight back. The therapist said, "Grab him by the arm, pull him around to face you, and say 'If you call me a shithead any more, I'll let the air out of your tires,'" (Judy, 2004, p. 37). When Judy did follow the therapist's advice, Karl [perpetrator] punched her so hard that she flew across the room into the corner of the windowsill, was knocked unconscious, and had to be taken to the hospital with a dislocated jaw and concussion (Judy, 2004, p. 38). For Judy, the therapist's advice was uninformed, dangerous, and ultimately unsupportive.

In sum, the victims' narratives revealed that they made sense of the violence they experienced by using the resources and knowledge they had available. This included "other" dramatis personae whose relationships shaped the victims' understanding of

violence and their sense of self, the reactions of witnesses, past experiences, and their own knowledge based on public discourse. Next, I turn to the perpetrators patterns of behavior as revealed in the victims' narratives.

Cycle of Violence

Those who study violence against women discuss the "cycle of violence" as the pattern of behaviors a perpetrator follows within an intimate relationship (Walker, 1979). First there is the tension-building phase during which minor violent incidents occur, this is followed by a violent episode (or "acute battering incident") in which the perpetrator realizes his actions are out of control after which follows a period of remorse, which is often known as the "honeymoon period" as the perpetrator turns into a loving and caring relationship partner for some time until his violent and abusive behaviors begin again (Walker, 1979). Several of the victims' narratives revealed perpetrators' behaviors that followed the cycle of violence. However, none of these women were able to identify the cycle of violence (i.e., the patterns of behavior the perpetrator followed) until they were out of the relationship.

Oftentimes it took being out of the relationship before the victim was able to see the patterns that had formed in their relationship. As noted, while in the relationship women often displayed confusion regarding the violent outbursts from their relationship partners [perpetrators]. This was the case for Peg who continually tried to make sense of her husband's violent behavior. Peg recalled, "I felt like it was without pattern. I tried to find a pattern to it; in fact, I spent a lot of my days thinking about a pattern so I could get this pattern set out in front of me. I figured if I found that pattern, then certainly I could avoid it" (Peg, 2004, p. 73). It is only afterwards that the victims were able to look back

(sometimes with the help of a counselor) and identify the patterns that took place. Whitney's abusive boyfriend's behaviors followed Walker's (1979) cycle of violence. Whitney had broken up with the perpetrator, but several months later he began showing up at her house with flowers and presents. It became increasingly difficult for Whitney to turn him away. Whitney explained,

> Why did I go back? Everyone always asks me that. Because he was different. He changed. The books about domestic violence talk about the honeymoon stage. Well, Brad [perpetrator] was ideal in the honeymoon stage. He was gentle. He was sweet. He gave me presents. I still have buckets of jewelry that he gave me; I can't stand to look at it, I can't touch it, but at the time it made me feel like a princess. And then, of course, there was a lot of pressure from his family, my family, and our friends to get back together. After a while, I thought they must be right. (Whitney, 2004, pp. 122-123)

Whitney thought that after she broke up with Brad [perpetrator] he learned his lesson that he needed to treat her properly or he would lose her. But within several months Brad began his controlling, abusive, and violent behavior all over again (Whitney, 2004, p. 123). Whitney was not able to see Brad's actions as part of the cycle of violence until she was out of the relationship and sought the help of books on intimate partner violence. Andrea also experienced a similar cycle of violence within her relationship to an abusive man. The violence her husband inflicted upon her always followed the same pattern. Seemingly out of nowhere there would be a violent outburst. This would be followed by apologies, remorse, and contrition from him. Andrea would forgive him and the cycle continued until Andrea ended the relationship (Andrea, 2004, p. 138). By ending the relationship Andrea ended the cycle of violence.

In sum, Part One of the victims' narrative detailed the violence they experienced at the hands of the perpetrators. This included physical force; force framed as play; force with a weapon; sexual assault; inhumane treatment; and psychological abuse such as

control, isolation, threats, criticism, and stalking. The violence took place anywhere and everywhere, including public spaces, private spaces, and pseudo-private spaces. There was no “space” free of violence. The victims made sense of the violence they experienced through “other” dramatis personae; that is non-heroes such as by using role model relationships as well as the responses of those who witnessed their victimization. Making sense of the violence often led the victims to blame themselves for their abuse. This is due to the perpetrators blaming the victims, the victims’ past experiences, such as childhood trauma, and the victims placing their self-worth on their role as wife and/or girlfriend. In the next section the victims’ mindsets shifted and they came to the realization that they were not to blame for the violence inflicted on them. I turn to Part Two now.

Part II:

Victims Discover they are not at Fault for their Victimization

In Part Two of the narrative arc the victims came to the realization they were not at fault for their victimization. This happened in a number of ways. Some victims identified a breaking point, either external or internal, that caused them to change the way they understood their situation, perpetrator, or self which eventually led to them getting out of the abusive relationship or violent experience. Others had a more gradual realization as opposed to a specific moment. Others (both heroes and non-heroes) played a role in the victims’ understanding of themselves and their victimization.

Breaking Point

The victims identified specific moments that enabled them to begin the process of getting out of their violent situation. I call these moments breaking points. Breaking points can happen either internally or externally. Sometimes they made the victims change the way they saw their place within the violent experience, or the way they saw the perpetrator. The breaking points are not always dramatic; some are gradual. For example it took one woman six years after her "breaking point" to leave her abusive husband (Mandy, 2004). An external breaking point refers to something outside of the woman that caused her to challenge her mindset about her situation within the abusive relationship. This could be the perpetrator's actions, or someone else's response to the victim. On the other hand, internal breaking points took place within the victim's own understanding. Ultimately, the breaking points enabled the victims to get out of the violent experience.

External factors. For most victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) the breaking point was an external factor. These could be a violent action inflicted on them by the perpetrator, which made them fear for theirs or a loved one's life. The breaking points marked the realization that they were not responsible for their abuse and that they were actually at risk by staying with their abuser. For example, after Peg giving birth to her second daughter developed symptoms that her obstetrician thought could be a kidney infection he told her to get to the emergency room right away.

> So I got off the phone and I said to Ira [perpetrator], 'You know, I really need to go to the emergency room…I'm really sick.' And he said, 'No, I'm not gonna drive you. I've gotta get my sleep for work tomorrow.' So now I'm begging this guy, 'Please, you know, could I get to a hospital? I really, really need to go.' But he wouldn't take me. And so I'm laying awake there and thinking to myself…I could die here. And then all of a

> sudden it struck me. One of these days he's gonna kill me. He's gonna kill me in such a subtle way that nobody will know. (Peg, 2004, p. 76)

This, for Peg, marked the end. She finally understood that her life was at risk if she stayed with Ira [perpetrator] any longer. Maryellen also had a "terrifyingly bizarre incident" that left her feeling that her "life was at risk" (Maryellen, 2004, p. 195) if she stayed with Troy [perpetrator]. Weiss (2004) details Maryellen's experience:

> The family sat quietly at the dinner table eating spaghetti. Maryellen took a bite; as she swallowed, Troy suddenly pounced, grabbing her throat and squeezing with all his strength. On his face was The Look. As she struggled to escape, the spaghetti still in her throat, she felt herself blacking out. Choking, gagging, and trying desperately to catch her breath, she fought to remain conscious. Troy released his grip and sat back in his chair, watching her struggle. When she finally got her breathing under control, he blandly remarked, 'That was interesting. I always wondered what you'd look like when you were dying.' Then he turned back to his plate, reached for his fork, and took another bite of spaghetti. (Maryellen, 2004, pp. 195-196)

This incident left Maryellen very concerned about Troy's behavior and her own personal safety. Many victims of IPV, like Maryellen, felt as if they had some sort of control over their perpetrator's actions. Though Maryellen did not immediately leave Troy [perpetrator], this incident changed the way she understood Troy's behavior. Maryellen no longer blamed herself for the abuse; she understood that it was something she could not control and needed to get away from for her and her daughter's safety.

For other victims a violent action wakes them into immediate action. This was the case for Mara (2007):

> [O]ne morning before I went off to work, my boyfriend [perpetrator] and I got into an argument. I don't remember whether it was because the coffee wasn't hot enough or I'd forgotten to buy him a fresh pack of cigarettes, but suddenly he threw me across the room. My head hit the kitchen wall so hard that I saw stars and tasted blood in my mouth. Was that what finally knocked some fucking sense into my brain? Because a voice inside me—my other self—cried out, *You don't have to take this anymore! This is not your fault! You don't deserve this!* (Mara, 2007, p. 29)

Mara left immediately. She hit her boyfriend with a frying pan, picked up her two young children and ran out the door leaving all of her personal belongings and never looking back. Mara recalled, “I knew if I stayed, the violence would start all over again, and I was sick of it” (Mara, 2007, p. 30). Whitney also had a breaking point that led her to immediate action:

> I was standing in the backyard of his family’s house in my swim suit. I was dripping wet and my face was blue, because one of his favorite tricks was to drag me into the pool and hold me under the water. Brad [perpetrator] looked at me and said ‘You know, you’re never gonna be good enough.’ And it’s then that I realized: he’s right. I’m not. I’m never going to be good enough for him, so why am I even trying? Because he’s right, I never will measure up to what he wants. And then I thought, I’m glad! I’m glad I don’t have to have big long hair and be a size nothing and disappear into space. I really don’t want this. (Whitney, 2004, p. 127)

Whitney ended things with Brad [perpetrator] that very day. She had reached her breaking point. Whitney realized that Brad’s expectations were unrealistic and she did not have to continue to take his abuse. When she understood that the problem was Brad and not her she was able to get herself out of the relationship. Another example of a perpetrator-inflicted breaking point was when Andrea’s husband Gregg [perpetrator] forged a check from an account Andrea’s father had set up years prior for her and her two sisters. This for Andrea was the breaking point, “All I can tell you is, that was his big mistake” (Andrea, 2004, p. 139).

Not all external breaking points were violent actions inflicted by the perpetrator, some were the validation of a woman’s inner feelings about her abuse from an outside source. This was the case for Lillia (2004) who read a newspaper article about the increase in domestic violence during hunting season. This article gave her the realization that she was not alone in her abuse. The article featured an interview with the director of a battered women’s shelter. Lillia recalled, “I never knew that one existed before that,

ever anywhere. I never knew anyone but myself, you know, that this had happened to" (Lillia, 2004, p. 184). Lillia cut out the phone number to the battered women's shelter and hid it in her linen closet. Though she did not use the phone number or leave her abusive husband immediately, it was the validation Lillia needed to change her mindset about the violence being inflicted upon her by her husband [perpetrator]. That one article gave Lillia a name for what had been happening to her, allowed her to see that she was not alone in her abuse, and ultimately led her to leaving the relationship. Similarly, Elaine had an external breaking point that led to her re-evaluation of her relationship. Elaine had a complete stranger [hero] validate her beliefs about her husband on the streets of New York.

> One spring afternoon, we stood on a street corner at a downtown crosswalk. I looked up and saw a particularly lovely old pre-war building with a magnificent garden on its terraced roof. I pointed and said, "Isn't that building beautiful?" "Which one" sneered my husband, "you mean the one over there that looks exactly like every other building on the street?" A woman standing beside us wheeled abruptly and said, the way only a New Yorker could: "She's right, you know. That building *is* beautiful – and *you* are a horse's ass." (Elaine, 2004, p. 25)

This one incident opened the door to the possibility that the abuse was not in Elaine's head. This stranger's validation ultimately marked a breaking point, which led Elaine to leave her abusive husband less than a year later. Elaine recalled, "For the first time in eight years someone had confirmed the belief I had once held but long since relinquished: it wasn't me. It was him" (Elaine, 2004, p. 25). This hero helped Elaine identify herself as a victim and her husband as the perpetrator, which in turn enabled Elaine to leave her batterer.

Internal factors. For other victims validation from someone outside of the relationship was not possible, or just did not happen. Some recalled having a shift in their

thinking as their breaking point. This was the case for Kathy (2007), a high school student who was sexually assaulted by an acquaintance. Kathy recalled her internal breaking point, “Then it all came to me in a flash. ***This*** was it. ***This*** was it. I was going to lose my virginity in a cleaner’s van in the parking lot of a Kmart to a guy whose hair was bigger than his head and who probably didn’t even know my name” (Kathy, 2007, p. 55). This flash brought Kathy to reality and it was at this point that Kathy said, “Stop!” and “I don’t want to do this…” to the perpetrator (Kathy, 2007, p. 55). Though he continued to try and assault her, with the shift in her mindset Kathy was able to get herself out of the situation by opening the door to the van, causing the perpetrator to fall out onto the pavement. Similarly, for Carolee, reflection led to action. There was no dramatic breaking point. Carolee said she wanted to leave her abusive husband [perpetrator] to protect her son, Bobby (Carolee, 2004, p. 93). “[A]s Bobby got older, and I matured, then I knew I didn’t want him to be exposed to any more of this. So my job was to find a way to get free” (Carolee, 2004, p. 93). Carolee’s motivation was escaping for the safety and well-being of her child. Carolee recalled, “Up until then, I was just sure somebody would save me from this. I always knew that somebody was gonna come and take care of it. And then I realized that nobody was. It had to be me” (Carolee, 2004, p. 92).

For Maryellen a vision she had while she was in a coma after a particularly bad beating from her husband [perpetrator] gave her the strength and confidence to be able to leave him:

> While I was in the coma, I got these images of every path that I had ever been on, and how one of the paths that led me to Troy [perpetrator] had steered me away from other paths I could have taken. And I saw what I really wanted to do and be in life. I was so far from it, but I somehow knew that I was going to do a lot of good in the world because of the terrible stuff I had been through…I can’t explain it, but I do know that I

> was not the same person after that experience. I was not. (Maryellen, 2004, p. 199)

When Maryellen awoke from her coma she knew that she didn't deserve the abuse Troy had been inflicting on her. Maryellen told Troy [perpetrator] she wanted him out of her and their daughter's lives and that it would be best if he left the country. The vision Maryellen had during her coma changed the way she saw the violence within her relationship. She was able to change her mindset on her own, which ultimately enabled her to get out of the abusive relationship.

In sum, victim narratives identified breaking points as either external or internal moments that enabled the victims to get out of a violent experience. Some victims noted a specific violent action that made them realize the violence being inflicted on them was not their fault. Not all breaking points were immediate, though some were. Regardless of the timeline of leaving, or whether the breaking point was external or internal, the breaking point marked a change in the woman's mindset regarding her victimization. The most important aspect of the breaking point was that ultimately they aided the victim in leaving the perpetrator or getting out of a violent experience. Next, I turn to dramatis personae who hindered the victims' ability to see that the violence was not their fault.

Unsupportive Others [Non-Heroes]

Victims' narratives identified dramatis personae as unsupportive non-heroes based on how their actions and reactions made the victims feel. Actions categorized as unsupportive were blaming the victim, not believing the victim about her experience, making her feel badly or guilty, failing to provide comfort, and judging the woman based on her experience.

Victim blaming. We already know from the review of literature that victim blaming is both widely practiced and can be quite harmful to victims (Brownmiller, 1975; Meyers, 1997; Cowan, 2000; Wood, 2001; Dowler, 2006). And it can be even more devastating when coming from a professional, such as a therapist, law enforcement officer, or health care provider. This was the case for Whitney, Alice, and Andrea. Whitney sought counseling to deal with her sleeplessness and nightmares brought on by the abuse she had experienced. But as Whitney recalled her therapist [non-hero] "just wanted to know what had attracted me to Brad, and how he compared to my father. Then she talked a lot about how I can prevent this from happening to me again, and how I brought it on myself in the first place" (Whitney, 2004, p. 128). In reaching out to this therapist Whitney was expecting help, comfort, and support. It was devastating for her to instead be faced with blame. Similarly, Alice felt victimized by the defense attorney [non-hero] in her trial. He was snide and tried to tear Alice down during her cross-examination. He brought her to tears and made her question if the rape was her fault (Alice, 2002, pp. 180-198). Though he was doing his job by defending his client, in Alice's mind he was questioning her every action and placing blame on her for her own victimization. Finally, Andrea told a colleague and fellow health care professional, Marsha, that she had been a victim of domestic violence Marsha [non-hero] blamed her for the experience, "Out came the whole list of stereotypes: 'You're so articulate, Andrea. You're so smart, so sure of yourself. How could you?' I'm sure she didn't mean it to be hurtful, but her response was so typical. I could see that she blamed me for allowing it to happen" (Andrea, 2004, p. 142).

Nonbelievers [non-heroes]. Not believing the victim about her experience is another unsupportive action. It is hard for a woman to open up about her victimization, so when she does and she isn't believed it makes it even harder for her to talk about her experience in the future. For example, Whitney tried to confide in her friends about Brad's abusive behavior after she had broken up with him. But her friends refused to believe her; they thought she was lying. They determined she was no longer even worth being friends with after she had left Brad. High school became an even more miserable place for Whitney (Whitney, 2004, p. 122). Jesusa's narrative provided another example of a non-hero. During a custody hearing the judge [non-hero] was not convinced by Jesusa's claims of domestic violence; as a result she lost custody of her two sons. Jesusa called this, "another beating, not from my husband, but from the system" (Jesusa, 2004, p. 170). For Jesusa the loss of her children to her abusive husband was completely devastating. She continued to tell her story with the hope of mustering community support and, at the time of publishing, was working with her lawyer who was still fighting on her behalf (Jesusa, 2004, p. 171).

Aiding in victimization. Similar to not believing a victim about her experience is aiding in a woman's victimization through a lack of awareness. The support of a relationship from someone whose views are highly honored by the victim was detrimental if the relationship was abusive and the abuse was being hidden. This was the case for 16-year old Whitney. Her parents approved of her relationship and her friends were envious. Though they were not aware that Whitney's boyfriend, Brad, was abusive their support of the relationship ultimately lead Whitney to stay in it longer and made her not confide in them about the abuse that was taking place (Whitney, 2004).

Guilt on top of victimization. Dramatis personae who made victims feel badly or guilty about their victimization were also categorized as non-heroes. For example, Alice's older sister Mary was a non-hero in the way she continually made Alice feel guilty about her rape getting in the way of Mary's own spotlight. Alice recalled, "The City of Syracuse scheduled testimony to begin on May 17, the same day as my sister's commencement ceremony at Penn. I continually stole her spotlight whether I wanted to or not" (Alice, 2002, p. 162). Obviously, Alice wasn't trying to steal attention away from Mary, but Mary treated Alice poorly for something that was completely out of her control. Similarly, Alice's father made comments regarding her rape that Alice found unsupportive. For example, when Alice pointed her rapist out to her father at the courthouse before trial her father responded, "He's smaller than I thought" (Alice, 2002, p. 171). From Alice's perspective, this comment about the rapist's size seemed judgmental, insensitive, and hurtful, especially coming from her father. This was not the only situation in which Alice's father allowed his ignorance to overcome his ability to be supportive. One evening at the dinner table, Alice's father asked, "How could you have been raped if he didn't have the knife?" (Alice, 2002, p. 58). Alice really needed her father to understand, because in her mind, "If he didn't…what man would?" (Alice, 2002, p. 59). So she took her father upstairs to try and explain it to him. "He did not comprehend what I had been through, or how it could have happened without some complicity on my part. His ignorance hurt" (Alice, 2002, p. 60).

Alice was angry with her family for treating her differently after she was raped. Alice recalled, "It made me angry with her [sister Mary] and with my parents. I needed the pretense that inside the house I was still the same person I'd always been. It was

ridiculous but essential, and I felt the stares of my family as betrayals, even though intellectually I knew otherwise" (Alice, 2002, pp. 60-61). For Alice being seen and treated as the same person she was prior to her victimization was of upmost importance. Her parents' home was the one place she felt she should be able to be her same self from before the rape, so when her family members treated her differently she felt hurt, misunderstood, and ultimately angry. Alice was not only angry with her family members; she had a great deal of rage, anger, and hatred toward her rapist as well. Before taking the witness stand at her rapist's trial Alice had written a note on her skin underneath her skirt. Alice recalled, "'You will die' was inked into my legs in dark blue ballpoint. And I didn't mean me" (Alice, 2002, p. 173). As noted earlier, Alice had worked with her poetry professor on a poem, which allowed her to express her rage and hate toward the man who raped her. By writing "If they caught you…" (printed in full: Alice, 2002, pp. 98-99) Alice had been given the permission she needed to confront her feelings of anger and hate that she had been embarrassed of before (Alice, p. 101).

Failed to provide comfort. Victims' narratives revealed another way dramatis personae were unsupportive was by not providing comfort during a victim's time of need. An example of is Tricia [non-hero], a representative from the Rape Crisis Center, who was continually present throughout Alice's trial. Though Tricia had good intentions, and was always physically there for Alice, she offered her no comfort, and led Alice to feeling isolated through her use of generalizations (Alice, 2002, p. 133). Another example of a non-hero was the leader of Alice's church announcing to the congregation that Alice had been attacked, but lying about what happened, saying that it was a robbery as opposed to rape. Though he was trying to give Alice support, he ultimately demonstrated

to Alice that her rape was something that she should be ashamed of and hide (Alice, 2002, p. 65).

There were also dramatis personae who were unable to be fully supportive to the victim because they could not handle the situation, even if they wanted to help. An example was Ken [non-hero], a friend of Alice, who came to her aid when she called him, but who did not possess the strength to give Alice the support she needed. Alice called Ken to help sketch her rapist after she met him on a street near campus. Ken was very concerned and wanted to help, so he came over to Alice's dorm, and even went with Alice in the back of the police car searching for the rapist. But Ken was unable to help with the sketch and offered Alice no real emotional support. Ken was more uncomfortable than Alice during their ride in the police car. In Alice's eyes Ken was a wimp, and she realized that she no longer fit in his world, so after the search she cut him out of her life (Alice, 2002, pp. 108-109).

Similarly, other dramatis personae also allowed their own personal weaknesses to get in the way of their ability to be supportive. This was the case for Alice's mom [non-hero] and her friend Tree [non-hero]. One evening after dinner Alice tried to tell her mother about what happened to her in the tunnel, but part way through her mom stopped her. "'I can't, Alice,' she said. 'I want to, but I can't.' 'It helps me to try and talk about it, Mom,' I said. 'I understand that, but I don't think I'm the one to do it with.' 'I don't have anyone else,' I said" (Alice, 2002, p. 76). Alice's mom was unable to talk to Alice about her experience. Alice's mother also let her weakness trump her daughter's need of support when she refused to go to the trial, even with encouragement from her own therapist (Alice, 2002, p. 161). The complete lack of physical support from her mother

was hard for Alice to deal with, especially because she needed it so badly. Alice's friend Tree also demonstrated a lack of support when she was unable to help Alice shower and wash her back, even though Alice could barely stand due to the trauma of the rape (Alice, 2002, p. 21-22). For the victim, in this case Alice, it was incredibly hurtful when during a dire time of need, a friend or relative, such as her mom, allowed their own weaknesses and insecurities to get in the way of being supportive. This lack of support left Alice feeling even more alone in her victimization.

As the victims' narratives revealed, family and friends had the ability to turn a bad situation worse in the way they handled it. For Alice, an 18-year old college freshman, her family (Mom, Dad, sister) was her primary support network. She needed the three of them to be sympathetic, understanding, and present for her when she needed to talk or had to go to trial, a hearing, or the police lineup. But not one of Alice's family members came to the Grand Jury hearing or the police lineup, and only her father came to her trial (though he outwardly acknowledged his concern about the possibility of it cutting into his annual trip to Spain) (Alice, p. 115, p. 161). Alice noted her disappointment that her mom did not come to the trial. She said, "No matter how tough my pose, I both wanted and needed her" (Alice, p. 161). And during a phone call years later, Alice learned that neither one of her parents had wanted to go to her trial (Alice, p. 161). Even years later it was painful for her to hear that those closest to her, those who were supposed to support her always, did not even want to when she was in her greatest time of need.

Judgmental and insensitive responses. Some dramatis personae behaved inconsiderately or insensitively when talking to a victim of gender-based violence. This

was the case when Alice met with her mother's psychiatrist, Dr. Graham, who was also a woman. As soon as Alice mentioned rape, Dr. Graham [non-hero] said, "Well, I guess this will make you less inhibited about sex now, huh?" (Alice, 2002, p. 77). Alice was offended by the inappropriate comment, and showed her displeasure by walking out of the session. The comment left Alice feeling that "no one — females included — knew what to do with a rape victim" (Alice, 2002, p. 78).

As noted in Part One, Whitney, like Alice, received insensitive responses from those who played witness to her victimization. The crowd that witnessed Brad [perpetrator] knock Whitney to the ground in front of the movie theater acted as non-heroes in their lack of response (Whitney, 2004, p. 126). Brad's father also acted as a non-hero in his reaction to seeing his son [perpetrator] push Whitney down the stairs and nearly breaking her wrist (Whitney, 2004, p. 125). As discussed previously, Brad's father [non-hero] roughly forced her hand back and forth to convince Whitney that her wrist was not broken. He also told her that it was "nothing to make a big deal over," (Whitney, 2004, p. 125). These behaviors, of both Brad's father and the crowd at the movie theater, demonstrated to Whitney that the abuse was acceptable, no one had a problem with it, and it was a part of life that she needed to deal with.

Another way dramatis personae appeared unsupportive to victims was when they formed an opinion of the woman based on her victimization or the way she chose to handle an obviously difficult situation. For example, Alice's peers at Syracuse [non-heroes] did not expect her to return to campus, so when she did it made her seem even weirder to them. "Somehow my return licensed them to judge me — after all, by returning, hadn't I asked for this?" (Alice, 2002, p. 93).

In sum, the victims' narratives revealed that non-heroes blamed the victim, did not believe the victim about her experience, made her feel badly or guilty, failed to provide comfort, and judged the woman based on her experience. Next, are the "other" dramatis personae who supported the victims in helping them see that they were not at fault for their victimization.

Supportive Others [Heroes]

Supportive others are dramatis personae that the victims identified as providing aid and comfort during their time of need. According to the victims' narratives, support was shown through physical, emotional, and financial means. This included validating a victim's feelings; not judging the women based on her victimization; physically helping the victim get out of an abusive relationship or violent situation; providing comfort, hope, protection, and encouragement to the victim; and aiding in the recovery and healing process.

Validating victims' feelings. Two women noted validation by an outside source as helpful to identifying their partner as abusive. This allowed the women to modify the way they understood their relationships, their place within the relationships, and their own victimization. Ultimately, it enabled the victims to get out of an abusive relationship. In one example an officer [hero] approached Carolee on a base in Germany where both she and her husband lived and worked. The officer expressed concern regarding her husband's temper. "Was she aware, he asked, that Frank had a terrible temper? Yes, she replied, but Frank didn't really mean anything by his outbursts. He only acted that way, she assured the officer, if he was provoked" (Carolee, 2004, p. 89). Though Carolee did not confide to the officer her husband's abuse, it gave her the realization she was in

trouble and needed to get out of Germany. To Carolee, the concern from the officer also demonstrated that Frank's temper and violent behavior was not solely focused on her.

Non-judgmental responses. For victims, discussing their experiences can be daunting, so being met with a non-judgmental, compassionate reaction was considered supportive. For example, when she opened up to her principal about her abusive husband, Judy, an elementary school teacher, found a support system she did not realize she had. During a breakdown in the school hallway the principal [hero] took Judy into his office and asked how she would feel about talking to a professional (Judy, 2004, p. 37). Though the principal did not feel that he knew how to deal with the situation, he responded in a supportive way, which made him a hero.

Physical support. Other times support meant aiding the victim in a way that physically helped her get out of a violent relationship or situation. This was the case for Becky, Andrea, and the young Sudanese girl. Becky, in trying to escape her abusive husband, ran to a pay phone and called a girlfriend [hero], who came, picked her up, and helped develop a plan of what to do and where to go. They ultimately decided that she would stay with her uncle [hero] who provided Becky and her infant son with a place to live, as well as physical protection from her abusive and violent ex-husband (Becky, 2004, p. 105-6). Both Becky's girlfriend and uncle provided physical support. Similarly, Andrea's father [hero] upon hearing about her husband's abusive behavior came immediately to pick her up and provided financial support as she worked to get on her feet. "Her father also bought her a new car to replace the one that Gregg had convinced her to put in his name 'for insurance purposes.'… When she had been ready to escape, he

had been there for her, No question, no reprimands, nothing but unconditional support" (Andrea, 2004, p. 140).

Another example of a parent who provided physical support took place in the country of Sudan. The murahaleen [perpetrators] had come to a small village and taken a woman's five daughters. For days the girls walked tied to a rope with other girls who had been taken from their families. The girls' mother [hero] followed their trail and eventually caught up to the murahaleen and her daughters. She yelled at the men to stop and said to them, "Give me these girls!" (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 36). She pointed to her daughters, crying she said, "You have taken four others. Four of my children are gone. My husband died looking for them" (Anonymous Sudanese girl, 2007, p. 36). The men continued on without saying anything to her, but the mother was determined to save her daughters so she walked with them for an hour holding their hands. When the men turned and saw her she told them that she was going to continue to walk with them wherever they went. Eventually one of the soldiers came down from his horse and cut the five daughters free from the rope. This act of physical protection saved her daughters from the murahaleen [perpetrators] and the terrible atrocities they surely would have inflicted on the girls.

Emotional support. Heroes offered victims emotional support by being on their side or rooting for them, especially when dealing with the legal system. One of the only women to discuss the legal process with Alice was Gail [hero], the prosecuting attorney in Alice's rape trial. Gail supported Alice by sharing her goal of winning the trial and getting her rapist convicted (Alice, 2002, p. 134). Gail offered Alice support most would expect from a parent; she told her she was proud of her and offered her encouragement

throughout the trial, which was an emotionally trying time for Alice (Alice, 2002, p. 199). During the rape trial Alice felt she had several people rooting for her, which gave her the emotional support she needed to be able to get through the trial. For example, police Sergeant Lorenz [hero] told Alice after her Grand Jury hearing that he was "pulling" for her (Alice, p. 144). Alice also felt support while she was being cross-examined by the defense attorney, she was crying and the bailiff brought tissues and water over to her. As she did this, the bailiff [hero] said to Alice, "You're doing fine; breathe" (Alice, p. 175). This reminded Alice of the emergency room nurse [hero] who had been encouraging and supportive as well and gave Alice the strength to get through the rest of the cross-examination. She thought, "I was lucky; people were pulling for me" (Alice, p. 175). Just a few comforting words and Alice was able to regain her strength because she was able to feel the support of those around her.

Shared experiences. One of the main ways victims found emotional support was through the sharing of stories and personal experiences. This was the case for Mara, Alice, and Lillia. For Mara witnessing the strength of other victims who had survived violence made her recognize her own strength (Mara, 2007, p. 30). Even if the experiences were not the same, just having someone who understood what it was like to have an act of violence change their life was comforting to the victim. This was the case for Alice when Myra, an elderly woman from her church, came over to visit. Myra had been the victim of a violent home robbery and Alice felt more at ease in her presence simply because of their shared understanding of victimization, "Her presence was comfort and succor to me" (Alice, 2002, p. 67). Lillia also recalled receiving emotional support from shared experiences. A social worker gave Lillia hope that she still had a

chance for a normal and happy life by sharing her own story of victimization and recovery (Lillia, 2004, pp. 186-187).

Aid in healing and recovery. Oftentimes victims needed the most emotional support during their healing and recovery, after they were out of the violent relationship or experience. For Alice being granted permission to hate her rapist was a crucial part of her coping process. Her poetry professor, Tess [hero], gave her the tools and permission to hate her rapist by helping her start a poem about him and having Alice workshop her poem in class. Alice recalled, "She, by writing that first line down, by workshopping the piece, had given me my permission slip — I could hate" (Alice, 2002, p. 101). Tess could tell that Alice had not dealt with her anger over the rape. By allowing Alice to have and express feelings that she was ashamed of, Tess was helping Alice heal and cope with the violence that had been inflicted on her, which was exactly what Alice needed.

Victims' narratives revealed that some women found support in religion and spirituality. These victims used their religion to find the strength to leave a violent relationship, as well as in their healing and emotional recovery. For example, without friends or family to turn to in the United States, Jesusa found the strength to keep going through God and her devout Catholicism. Jesusa said, "I always thank God for everything that has happened to me. He is the one who give [*sic*] me courage to get out" (Jesusa, 2004, p. 170). Similarly, Lillia and Betty also found support in their religion. They both acknowledged their belief that God had them experience the violence that they did because he had a greater purpose for their lives. This belief in God allowed them to help others amidst their own hardships. This will be discussed further in Part Three.

In sum, heroes helped victims realize they were not at fault for their victimization. They supported the victims physically, emotionally, and financially. Heroes validated victims' feelings; aided victims in getting out of an abusive relationship or violent situation; provided comfort, hope, protection, and encouragement to victims; and aided in their healing and recovery process.

It isn't Easy to Leave

The victims' narratives revealed it took some victims several attempts at leaving their abuser before they were finally able to walk out of the relationships completely. This is common, as research has indicated, "On average, battered women return to their batterers five times before they escape for good" (Weiss, 2004, p. 175). Other researchers have used averages as high as seven times (Berlinger, 2001). Judy is one of the victims who returned to her abusive husband before getting out for good. Judy had left her husband and had filed a protective order against him, but she allowed him to move back into the house to try and save their marriage (Judy, 2004, pp. 39-40). Judy, who took her marriage vows very seriously, says letting her abusive husband move back home is something her parents didn't completely understand. She said, "Why would I do something like that? I don't really understand it myself, other than thinking…well, you know, maybe we should give this one more try" (Judy, 2004, p. 40). Less than two months later Judy left her abusive husband for good.

The act of leaving the perpetrator helped some victims, like Judy, gain the strength they needed to leave him completely. These victims gained strength through the act of repetitive leaving. This was also the case for Jesusa who left her husband three times before leaving him for good. The first three times Jesusa left Hank [perpetrator] she

felt guilty and went back to him. She kept thinking he would change, but he never did (Jesusa, 2004, p. 168). Jesusa recalled, “I leave [*sic*] four times, I stay [*sic*] in the shelter four times, but the first three times I feel [*sic*] guilty and I go [*sic*] home. I always think [*sic*] he will change, he will choose to be good to me. But he don’t [*sic*] change” (Jesusa, 2004, p. 168). Jesusa gained a great deal of knowledge and support while staying at the shelter when she left her husband. During this time she built up the strength and courage to leave her abusive husband through the act of actually leaving him. Though it took her four times, Jesusa did eventually leave her husband for good.

In sum, victims identified dramatic actions that enabled them to change the way they thought about the violence inflicted on them. Some of these actions were breaking points, which according to the narratives, were specific moments that marked a shift in the victim’s mindset that eventually enabled her to get out of the violent experience or relationship. Victims pinpointed both external and internal breaking points. Dramatis personae also played roles in the victims’ abilities to make sense of their victimization. Non-heroes hindered the victims ability to make sense of the violence when they made victims feel worse about their experiences, blamed the victim for the perpetrators actions, did not believe the victim, formed an opinion of her based on her victimization, aided in her victimization, or were in a supportive position, yet failed to play a sympathetic role. Heroes, on the other hand, aided the victim in getting out of an abusive relationship or violent situation; validated a victim’s feelings; provided comfort, hope, protection, and encouragement to the victim; and aided in her recovery and healing process. Now that we have an understanding of the factors that influenced the victims’ abilities to make sense

of their victimization, I move to Part Three, which details how the victims came to terms with their experience, modified their behaviors, and ultimately became victims no more.

Part III.

Victims Come to be Victims No More

In the final part of the narrative arc victims discussed the repercussions of their victimization and how they moved on with their lives after it was over. Repercussions included physical ailments, such as migraines, nightmares, and flashbacks; taking precautions to further avoid violence and victimization; distractions, such as work or drugs; a greater fear for personal safety; self-blaming; and issues with men or relationships. In order to move on from their victimization and end their suffering victims started over and rebuilt their lives. The victims' narratives revealed new found hope. They also discussed turning points after the violence took place, which made them finally feel safe, or come to a realization that they are not done with healing and recovery.

Repercussions

According to the victims' narratives, repercussions are the consequences of violence and victimization. Some repercussions of victimization are manifested physically. For example, Alice began getting migraines after her rape, with the worst one coming the night before she testified at the conviction hearing of her rapist (Alice, 2002, p. 169). Another example of a physical repercussion was the issues Alice had with food immediately after she was raped, "At first, I had difficulty with solid food. Initially my mouth was sore from the sodomy and, after this, having food in my mouth reminded me too much of the rapist's penis as it lay against my tongue" (Alice, 2002, p. 60). Other

physical repercussions the victims identified were having nightmares or flashbacks of their victimization or abuse. This was the case for Whitney:

> Stupid things will trigger it. Brad always wore Eternity cologne. If I smell it, then that night I'll have a nightmare. I try to tell myself before I go to sleep, "You're okay, think about something good, think about something good." But then I'll have a dream and I'll wake up and realize it wasn't a dream, it was real, that really did happen to me. (Whitney, 2004, p. 128)

Alice also mentioned waking up screaming from a nightmare about her rapist the night after she saw him on a street near her school (Alice, 2002, p. 113). Elaine discussed having nightmares and flashbacks of her years spent in an abusive marriage, "I still have flashbacks, especially when the evening new blares the horror of one more woman beaten or murdered by a man who told her he loved her. I still have nightmares, especially when I teach or write about domestic abuse" (Elaine, 2004, p. 28). The physical repercussions were oftentimes accompanied with mental repercussions.

Mental repercussions mentioned by victims included having a greater level of fear for their personal safety, having issues trusting men or their own ability to find a good man, and self-blaming for their victimization. One example of a mental repercussion of violence against women was post-traumatic stress, sometimes labeled PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Alice dealt with post-traumatic stress after being raped, "I never questioned what was happening to me. It all seemed normal. Threat was everywhere. No place or person was safe. My life was different from other people's; it was natural that I behaved differently" (Alice, 2002, p. 229). Alice was constantly on edge, playing out horrible scenes in her mind, both awake and asleep, which eventually she self-diagnosed as PTSD (Alice, 2002, pp. 239-240). Alice wrote, "I had post-traumatic stress disorder, but the only way I would believe it was to discover it on my own" (Alice, 2002, p. 240). Becky also dealt with constant fear for her safety after she

had left her violent and abusive husband. It took years for Becky to really believe she was safe, “Every time I walked out my door, I thought…well, just because he hasn’t snapped and killed me so far, it doesn’t mean that he won’t” (Becky, 2004, p. 107). Alice’s fear seemed to be all around her, while Becky’s was focused on her violent ex-husband. Similarly, Peg continually expected more violence to be inflicted on her; only her focus was on her new, non-abusive husband. Peg recalled, “I overanalyzed. I kept thinking…I don’t know how it’s gonna happen, but he’s gonna start in on me any day now. I was always looking over my shoulder, thinking that if he ever started, I’d be ready for him” (Peg, 2004, p. 79). But the abuse never came from her new husband because, as Peg slowly learned, he was not an abusive man. It can take victims of violence against women years to feel they are safe. This was the case for Elaine. When Elaine left her abusive husband, she didn’t realize that she was safe, she thought she had to keep protecting herself. One of the ways she did this was to create a set of guidelines in an attempt to keep herself from harm:

> Melvin [perpetrator] had a beard; I dated only clean-shaven men. Melvin was a fussy and finicky eater; I looked for men who cared little about food. Melvin spent long hours studying car and stereo magazines; one attraction of the man who later became my husband was his lack of interest in all things mechanical. When I married Melvin Kesselman, I eagerly embraced my new monogram. When I married Neal Whitman, I kept my maiden name. (Elaine, 2004, p. 28)

It took years for Elaine to finally realize that she was safe and that it was not her guidelines that were keeping her safe, but the fact that she had left the perpetrator. This is similar to Lillia, who did not realize how brainwashed she was until she was safely at the shelter after leaving her abusive husband. Tony [perpetrator] had completely deteriorated Lillia’s self -confidence during their five year relationship, “I was so brainwashed that I believed the whole world was bad. I was in a state of mind where I thought I was never

gonna be free" (Lillia, 2004, p. 186). Lillia had escaped to live in a shelter, where she finally felt her body was free, but then realized how much damage Tony [perpetrator] had actually done to her psychologically. While living at the shelter Lillia received emotional support from a social worker [hero] who gave Lillia hope by telling her own personal story:

> She told me that she had been in an abusive relationship before she was married to this husband, that now she had a wonderful marriage with her new husband, and that my life could change just like hers did. And at that moment, it was like my whole chest opened up and I just thought: Oh, my gosh, I can have a normal life! She gave me hope that my life could be different. She told me, I made it, and you can make it. She gave me hope. (Lillia, 2004, pp. 186-187)

To Lillia hearing that she still had a chance for a normal and happy life was the assurance she needed. Her social worker gave her hope for leading a life free from abuse.

Another example of self-confidence being whittled away by an abusive partner was Judy who recalled having to mentally train herself to gain back her strength and independence:

> I just keep building and growing and getting more independent. Yes, I think I'm strong. At first I didn't think so. I'd been put down and my self-esteem was shot. It took me a while to get it boosted up again. And even now, he'll do something to get at me, and I can feel it slipping down. But, you know, I'm at the point where, if I let him know that it's bothering me, then he wins… Now I just think, well, big deal. I won't lower myself to his level. (Judy, 2004, p. 44)

While Judy was married to her abuser, he worked away at her mentally, leaving her with very low self-confidence and self-esteem. But after leaving him Judy was able to regain her strength and confidence, though it is something she continually works to do.

Whitney was another victim who had severe mental repercussions stemming from her three-year relationship to a violent, manipulative, and controlling man. Weiss (2004) discusses some of the mental repercussions of Whitney's abuse, "Two years later,

seemingly innocuous sights can send Whitney into a state of panic. Triangles. BMWs. Country music. Even flowers" (Whitney, 2004, p. 127). Whitney explained why flowers bring her such anguish, "Guys bring me flowers sometimes when they come to pick me up for a date and I'm just like, 'Oh, no!' Because to me flowers mean he's either going to do something bad to me, or he already has" (Whitney, 2004, p. 127). The consequences of violence against women can last a lifetime for victims. This was the case for Andrea whose husband, Gregg [perpetrator] became abusive while he and Andrea were on their honeymoon in Hawaii. Andrea has refused to ever step foot in Hawaii again and even "refuses to eat Macadamia nuts" (Andrea, 2004, p. 138). Similarly, Becky, was not able to be in a room if anyone is drinking.

> It doesn't matter who they are, it doesn't matter how well I know them, it doesn't matter how benign a person they are. My husband is the nicest, gentlest man, but if he has two beers, I panic. Which I recognize is completely irrational. He hardly ever drinks…if he had three beers he'd be asleep. But if I see him reaching for a beer, I get this panicky thing in my chest. Leonard [perpetrator] hit me when he was sober, but he hit me harder when he was drunk… I don't think I'll ever get past it if twenty-seven years later I'm still having trouble. (Becky, 2004, p. 108)

The abuse and violence may be in the past, but the consequences live on for the victims.

Self-blame. Another repercussion of violence against women is self-blame. Some victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) fixated on being able to spot their partner as abusive after they were safely out of the relationship. This was the case for Elaine. For years after Elaine had gotten out of her abusive marriage she continued to blame herself. She wrote, "I should have known. I should have realized. I should have spotted him as a threat. What signs had I missed?" (Elaine, 2004, p. 29). Elaine explained her fixation with trying to spot her abusive ex-husband as a batterer, "like a compulsive archeologist, I laboriously sifted through the dust of our courtship until, bored and irritated with what

felt like an obsession, I would berate myself for wallowing. The marriage had ended years ago. I was safe for heaven's sake. Why couldn't I let go?" (Elaine, 2004, p. 29). Andrea also questioned her own judgment, even years after getting out of her abusive marriage that only lasted four months (Andrea, 2004, p. 136). Similarly, Carolee, who speaks about domestic violence, and knows that it is no fault of the victim said, "you can't lay a reason to it" (Carolee, 2004, p. 88). But she sought flaws within her childhood, such as the diplomacy and tact she learned in her mother's house that contributed to her abusive marriage (Carolee, 2004, p. 88). Similarly, Peg searched for signs she missed in the beginning that, in her mind, should have alerted her to Ira being a batterer. Peg married Ira when she was twenty years old in a Denver Courthouse. Peg now looks back on this as a sign, "That should have been a tip-off for me…He's not springing for a big wedding" (Peg, 2004, p. 69).

Impact on other relationships. Many of the victims of violence against women carried their fear and mistrust into further relationships and encounters with men. This was the case for Alice who began "a sort of unconscious lying" to herself during sex. She was focused on her male partner's pleasure. Alice recalled, "so if there were bumps and memories, painful flashes of the night in the tunnel, I rode over them, numbed" (Alice, 2002, p. 207). Alice would talk herself through sex, she repeated to herself in her head, "This is not Thorden Park, he is your friend, Gregory Madison is in Attica, you are fine" (Alice, 2002, p. 207). She explained further, "It often worked to get me through it, like gritting your teeth on a frightening carnival ride that those around you appear to enjoy. If you can't do, mimic. Your brain is still alive" (Alice, 2002, p. 207). Similarly, Andrea became much warier of men after leaving her abusive husband:

> I felt much more mistrustful, not surprisingly, after the divorce. I went out on a lot of first dates. I didn't especially feel like going out with anyone a second time. And then about six months after I left, I met Henry. And I went out with him on a second date because there was no doubt in my mind that he would never hit somebody. When I think back on it now, I can hardly believe it, but it's true: my initial relationship with Henry was based on my lack of fear rather than anything else. (Andrea, 2004, pp. 140-141)

It is oftentimes assumed that when a woman leaves her abusive partner she will find another abusive relationship, but in this study this was only the case for one victim. Becky entered into another unhealthy relationship after she had left her violent and abusive husband Leonard. She recalled, "It isn't that he was awful, but he would manipulate me. He knew how to make me feel guilty, make me feel sorry for him, and kind of get me to go along with his way" (Becky, 2004, p. 108). For four years this man would threaten to move out if they couldn't resolve something. Eventually Becky had enough and kicked him out. After this Becky began having a lot more fun and started to feel good about herself, as well as powerful. She recalled, "I had a harem of men. I learned how to manipulate men, rather than having them manipulate me" (Becky, 2004, p. 109). Becky goes on to explain how she had transformed after getting out of the second abusive relationship, "I was having a blast, but I wasn't taking any shit. I guess I sort of went to the other end of the spectrum. Don't raise your voice at me. Don't tell me what to do. I decided that if you don't take care of yourself, you can't depend on anyone else to do it" (Becky, 2004, pp. 109-110). Another woman, Judy, felt she had an obligation to find a father for her children after divorcing her violent husband. But after being single for eleven years (at the time Weiss's book was published) Judy conceded that she was unsure of her ability to choose an acceptable partner:

> Karl [perpetrator] treated me nicely when we were dating. He sent me flowers, you know, and he really sweet-talked me. And then he was just a

> different person when we got married. So it made me question myself, question if I ever truly was in love with him. Maybe it was just infatuation. I wonder if I even know what love is? I mean, I would hope that now I would know. But could I ever be sure? (Judy, 2004, pp. 43-44)

Judy questioned herself and her judgment as to being able to pick a suitable husband and father for her children. Whitney had not been out of her abusive relationship as long as Judy, but she also had not entered into another relationship with a man. Whitney explained one of the reasons she keeps men at a distance:

> I'm so afraid to even date a person, let alone to get married and have kids. I'm just terrified of my honeymoon. I mean, I'll probably just plead with my husband…please let's just not have a honeymoon. Let's just, you know, maybe hug each other every day and that will be plenty for me. (Whitney, 2004, p. 128)

Whitney hasn't dated anyone in two years (at the time Weiss's book was published) and has absolutely no interest in sex.

Some victims used distractions to numb their pain or to help them cope with it. This was the case for Betty, who developed a drug habit. Betty recalled, "The drugs allowed me to forget about the abuse, forget about the loneliness, and forget about the pain" (Betty, 2007, pp. 17-18). Dawn used work and building her company as a distraction from all the pain and abuse she suffered. Dawn recalled, "My work was my protection. Building the company was so important, I wasn't about to let a real relationship in because it would interfere with me survival and my livelihood. I needed to feel safe" (Dawn, 2004, p. 156). Besides acting as a distraction, Dawn's business helped her live in the rational world, and helped her get past the pain of the abuse she faced both in her childhood and her marriage. Dawn explained how building her company helped her cope, "So much of what I was doing with DSG [Dawn's company] was bringing this

clarity and this rationality to a world that had always felt like chaos" (Dawn, 2004, p. 157).

Aftermath

The victims discussed the "aftermath" as the events that followed their victimization. Many of the victims discussed rebuilding themselves after their experiences. The victims rebuilt their lives in many different ways including standing up for themselves, taking control from their perpetrator, returning to a former religion, and finding a new career path. Mandy began to rebuild her life by taking control away from her abusive husband. Mandy's husband [perpetrator] made threats about the impending divorce proceedings, as he was a lawyer. Mandy recalled, "I did a very strong thing… I took his offer and I left" (Mandy, 2004, p. 60). For Mandy this was her way of her exerting strength and taking control away from her abusive husband. Mandy explained, "It takes power away from people like Adam [perpetrator] when you don't fight with them. I knew if I'd fought with him on his turf, I would have continued to be the victim of what he was doing to me" (Mandy, 2004, p. 60). Before the divorce was finalized Mandy moved to a small apartment while their house was sold. In this apartment Mandy was happier than she had been in years. Mandy recalled, "I was as happy as a clam. I adored it. I had a little stereo system, I put my own music on…I was exquisitely happy. I got strong and did a lot of healing while I was still married to Adam. So when I got divorced, I was soaring. I was healthy and strong and vibrant and happy" (Mandy, 2004, p. 60). Lillia also rebuilt herself after ending her violent marriage to an abuser. As Lillia worked to rebuild her life she returned to Catholicism, which she believed was

monumental in that process. Lillia believed that God always had a greater plan for her life. Lillia explained:

> Ever since I was a child, I knew that God was a driving person in my life. You hear people saying, "God help me; why have You made me go through this?" I don't believe in that. If anything, maybe God guided me in this direction so that I can do what I'm doing now. Maybe He wanted me to experience this so that I can help the people I am helping now. (Lillia, 2004, p. 189)

For Lillia her God was a hero because he always had a plan and a purpose for her life even if she could not see it. Lillia became a victim advocate after her experience to help other victims of violence against women. Her religion and her God helped her remain positive and make the best of the situation. Similarly, Betty saw God as a driving force in her life with a purpose for her. "After my failed attempt at suicide, I began to realize that there was a reason God had spared my life…I began to work in the AIDS ward and I took classes in photography. When I accepted the fact that I had to do the time, I found my purpose" (Betty, 2007, p. 18). Both Betty and Lillia rationalized that God had them experience the violence that they did because he had a greater purpose for their lives. Their belief in God allowed them to help others amidst their own hardships.

Lillia recalled another way she worked to reconstruct her shattered self-image that her abusive husband had instilled in her,

> I re-brainwashed myself! Because the counselors at the shelter told me I had been brainwashed into believing that I was no good. I thought: Okay, I'm gonna get a new hairdo, I'm gonna get new clothes, he took all the antique furniture, so I'm gonna like contemporary, I'm gonna go totally the opposite. I started to jog every night for an hour, and during my jogging, I fed myself positive things like I'm intelligent, I'm beautiful, I am loving, I am loved, I am wonderful, I am happy and successful. And you know what? I became all those things again. (Lillia, 2004, pp. 188-189)

Another tale of rebuilding came from Maryellen. After leaving her abusive husband Maryellen's number one priority was her 14-year-old daughter, Sophie. Maryellen was worried that Sophie would carry the trauma of seeing her mother abused with her, so she found Sophie a therapist (Maryellen, 2004, p. 200). Maryellen also put herself in therapy and gradually became stronger (Maryellen, 2004, p. 201). Throughout this time, Maryellen began religious study at a local seminary, which led her to bereavement counseling. She took her savings and went back to school (Maryellen, 2004, p. 201). Her first job as a bereavement counselor was with hospice, which she found enormously fulfilling. Maryellen would bring relief to patients by letting them talk about their fears. Maryellen recalled how this helped her in the healing and reconstruction of her life, "It was a good experience. It felt like I was one step closer to being a doctor" (Maryellen, 2004, p. 201). It took several more years and a new, supportive husband, but finally at 42 Maryellen fulfilled her lifelong dream by entering medical school (Maryellen, 2004, p. 202).

Turning points. Some victims felt the need to completely start over their life after ending a relationship with an abusive partner. This was the case for Carolee who wanted to get rid of everything that had any connection to her husband [perpetrator]. She recalled, "I didn't want anything in our [her and her son Bobby's] life that Frank [perpetrator] had touched or sullied. We had a big garage sale, sold our furniture, and started over. It was sort of a rebirth…a new beginning" (Carolee, 2004, p. 95). Carolee moved back to Chicago, obtained a divorce, went back to work and school to earn her Master's, and put herself and her son in therapy. Mara also needed to move and completely start over after leaving her abusive boyfriend. She did so by moving her and

her kids to Newark, NJ, living in a shelter, working at McDonald's, and joining a battered woman's group (Mara, 2007, p. 30). This helped her with the healing process as she slowly began to see how strong she was through the other women in her group. Mara commented on the healing power of shared experiences, "I'll never forget the shock of recognition when I realized that the strength I saw in other women who'd survived so much violence was also in me" (Mara, 2007, p. 30). Another example of starting over was Alice who went off to her junior year in college with new clothes, a new figure, and a goal to "live normal" now that the rape and trial were behind her (Alice, 2002, p. 204).

Starting over was not always a fast and easy process; some victims took years to discover their own strength and independence. This was the case for Becky, who moved from one abusive relationship to another before she completed her social work degree and felt a sense of accomplishment. With renewed strength she kicked out her manipulative boyfriend of four years (Becky, 2004, p. 109). Becky recalled how her life changed after that, "I started having some really fun years. I felt terrific about myself. Powerful" (Becky, 2004, p. 109). This realization of power and strength that Becky discovered years after getting out of her abusive relationship have been noted by other victims as well.

Some victims mentioned a turning point that took place after their victimization that allowed them to recognize their safety or emotions that they had not allowed themselves to access before. For Andrea moving from Minneapolis to Seattle with her new husband finally allowed her to feel safe and happy. Andrea no longer needed to look over her shoulder. She soon became an advocate for the prevention of child abuse (Andrea, 2004, p. 141). Another example of a turning point after the victimization came

from Alice. While living in New York City Alice heard a woman raped right outside a basement window while she was down there to change a fuse. For the first time since her own rape she allowed herself to feel truly scared, her only concern became her safety. That very night she decided to leave New York (Alice, 2002, p. 241). New York meant violence to Alice, which is why she had felt like she fit in. Alice left New York City and went to California and filled in as caretaker at Dorland Mountain Arts Colony while the regular caretaker was away (Alice, 2002, p. 242). She finally began the healing process that she desperately needed.

Most victims discussed healing as an ongoing process, something they had to continually work on. For some it took many years to be able to come to terms with their experiences. This was the case for Dawn who went back into therapy during her third year of marriage to her new, non-abusive husband. She had not come to terms with the abuse in her life and was finally ready to confront and begin healing the pain she carried (Dawn, 2004, p. 159). Another example of the time it took to heal came from Elaine. Elaine recalled, “It was many years before I finally saw the pattern of my first marriage, before I named what had happened to me, before I understood that I had been a battered wife” (Elaine, 2004, p. 28). Once Elaine was able to name what had happened to her she was able to see that the mental boundary she had created to protect herself was not necessary. She was safe in her new relationship, not because of something she was or wasn’t doing, but because her new husband was not an abuser.

In sum, the victims of violence against women suffered in many different ways. Getting out of an abusive relationship or violent situation did not mean that the pain and suffering ended for the women. The consequences of their victimization live on long after

the abuse has ended. Victims identified repercussions of their abuse as physical, mental, or emotional effects caused by their experiences of violence against women. Physical repercussions discussed by victims included aches and pains such as migraines, nightmares, and flashbacks. Some victims also identified precautions they took to avoid further abuse, victimization, or personal hardship. As with other victims of traumatic experiences (such as war veterans), some women discussed post-traumatic stress, constant vigilance, expecting the worst, or not being able to feel safe even when they consciously knew they were out of harm's way. Many of the women also had issues with men or their own ability to find an acceptable partner. Self-blame was another repercussion mentioned by victims, sometimes made worse by fixating on their past relationships with the perpetrator to try and pinpoint how they missed their male partner as a batterer. One final repercussion discussed by victims was using drugs or work as a distraction from pain, loneliness, and abuse they were feeling. No matter what type of violence the women experienced they all suffered repercussions. But these women were not solely victims; they became heroes by not giving up, but getting out of the violent relationship or experience and reconstructing their lives.

The process of healing, starting over, rebuilding and reconstructing one's life after a violent relationship or experience has been discussed as being painful, laborious, and ongoing. Many of the victims talked about the rebuilding of their lives as an aftermath of their experiences. Some encountered a turning point that enabled them to finally feel safe or to face hidden feelings they had long ago buried. Some victims slowly gained their own strength and power over years of healing and coping. Other victims discussed re-brainwashing themselves, ridding themselves of anything their abusive partner touched,

and moving away from where they had been victimized. The aftermaths were part of the victims' narratives of violence as they demonstrated the victims becoming heroes through the ongoing experiences, emotions, and healing the victims had to deal with even long after the violence was over.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Violence against women is a serious social issue plaguing every country in our world. It is a widespread epidemic; one in three women has been a victim of some sort of gender-based violence (Amnesty International USA, 2012). Even with the prevalence of these atrocities, the realities of those who have experienced violence against women personally are not a part of the public discourse. Most of what is known about violence against women comes from mediated portrayals. Those mediated portrayals have been found to be unrealistic, and ultimately damaging to those who have lived through personal victimization (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Cowan, 2000; Dowler, 2006). The news media use certain frames to simplify a complex story. They classify victims of violence against women as either “virgin” or “vamp” and then use that identification to determine where the blame should be placed for the violence. This leads to blaming the victim, as well as unrealistic understandings of violence, those who commit acts of violence, and those who are the victims of it. This thesis is guided by the notion that the personal stories of victims are vital to generating a more realistic understanding of violence against women as a social issue. In turn, I asked, what stories victims of violence against women (VAW) tell about their experience and how they see themselves.

Stemming from feminist standpoint theory’s goal of a more complete basis of knowledge I have used the words of female victims who have been strategically oppressed. In fact, van Wormer (2009) stresses that women’s personal narratives of victimization are valued as sources of knowledge and truth from the feminist standpoint perspective. Another aspect of feminist standpoint theory pertinent to this thesis is the

notion that the role of the researcher is fundamental to the process. According to Henwood and Pidgeon (1995) disclosing personal experience in research explicates a source of knowledge. As mentioned previously, I have been a victim of violence against women. By disclosing my own victimization I am displaying my standpoint from an oppressed position and claiming experience as a form of knowledge.

In order to answer the research question 22 personal victim narratives were analyzed using fantasy theme analysis. Each victim narrative was analyzed for key words and phrases that identified the scene, dramatis personae, and actions. These themes were compared between texts as categories emerged and were reevaluated until the data was exhausted. An overarching narrative emerged from the texts, which reflects the victims' experiences from victimization to recovery. The overarching story is told in three parts. The first part of the narrative tells of the victimization the women experienced. This includes how the victims made sense of the violence. The second part details how the victims came to the realization that the violence they suffered was not their fault. And the third part chronicles how the victims came to terms with their experiences, modified their behaviors, and were victims no more.

According to the victim's narratives violence took place in public, private, or pseudo-private spaces, which included an aspect of both the public and private sphere. The victims' narratives identified violence that took place in public, such as outside of a movie theater, at sports camp, and on a university campus was a demonstration of the perpetrator's belief that their behaviors were nothing they needed to hide. It also left victims feeling as if those who witnessed the violence had no problem with it. Alternatively, being victimized in the private sphere violated the victim's "safe" space in

such a way that she lost all feelings of personal safety. Overall, the victims' narratives revealed that violence could occur anywhere, anytime.

Within the scene themes dramatis personae themes emerged. The dramatis personae are those who were involved in the action of the narratives, which included victims of violence, villains (aka perpetrators), and others (i.e., heroes and non-heroes). The characteristics, emotions, and motivations of the victims displayed how the victims of violence portrayed themselves within their narratives. Concurrent with past research (Enander, 2010), some victims of IPV called themselves stupid. However, the victims of sexual assault also identified feelings of stupidity. The victims' narratives also revealed feelings of embarrassment, anger, confusion, and fear. They also identified motivations for staying in an abusive relationship such as upholding traditional gender roles, and self-blame for their victimization.

The victims also disclosed their relationship to the perpetrator in their narratives. The narratives revealed that most victims knew the perpetrator, in fact only one of the perpetrators was a complete stranger. This differs from public knowledge, which assumes most acts of violence against women are committed by strangers; though it is concurrent with academic research (Cowan, 2000). This is important in part because it has been found that the police were less likely to make an arrest on sexual assault charges if the perpetrators were acquainted to the victims (Chen & Ullman, 2010).

The violent acts identified by the victim narratives were those that caused physical, emotional, or psychological harm to the victims. These included physical force, force framed as play, force with a weapon, psychological abuse used to diminish the victims' self-worth, control, isolation, stalking, sexual assault, and inhumane treatment.

Victims' narratives described physical force as any action that caused or intended to cause bodily harm. In cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) most victims revealed that the perpetrators were not violent until after they were married, which added to the victims' feelings of self-blame. This was not the case for all the victims however, as several noted violence in dating relationships. Similar to past research (Walker, 1979), some victims of intimate partner violence mentioned an increase in physical force during pregnancy. Victims' narratives defined violent acts of aggression, force, or power used to violate a woman sexually as sexual assault. Sexual assault did not only happen outside of relationships; it happened in marriages and dating relationships as well. These relationships made it more difficult for a victim to categorize her experience as sexual assault. Victims revealed psychological abuse as the most damaging long term because it diminished their self-esteem. This is concurrent with past findings (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Sleutel, 1998).

For victims of IPV making sense of their victimization was particularly problematic. Several victims noted having difficulty labeling themselves as victims or their experience as violent. One of the complications was that the perpetrator was nonviolent much of the time. This led the victims to believe that the violent side of their partner was not the real him. This belief disassociated the violence from the perpetrator and placed blame on factors that were beyond the man's control, such as the victim herself. This finding has been well documented in past research (Walker, 1979; Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Wood, 2001; Häggblom & Möller, 2007; Enander, 2010). Another complication noted by victims' narratives was their feelings that the violence they were experiencing was not as bad as it could be. This is concurrent with past findings in which

victim identified feeling as if the violence in their relationship was not bad enough to constitute labeling it as abuse or battering (Wood, 2001; Enander, 2010). Victims' narratives revealed another complication in making sense of their victimization was self-blame. Both victims of IPV and sexual assault described feelings of self-blame. Similarly, Häggblom and Möller (2007) found that battered women repressed feelings of innocence during their abuse due to brainwashing, psychological control, and manipulation by the perpetrator.

Victims of IPV also make sense of their victimization through the influence of non-heroes. Victims' narratives revealed the use of role model relationships [non-heroes] to inform how they understood the violence within their personal relationship. Those victims who grew up in violent homes believed that violence was normal in healthy relationships. Wood (2001) also found that women who grew up in violent households were more likely to see violence as a normal part of relationships. Conversely, those victims who grew up in non-violent households had no context for their abuse and therefore displayed confusion and self-blame when they were faced with violence. Finally, some victims revealed growing up in homes with strictly enforced gender roles, which taught the women to place their self-worth on their role as wife and/or mother. Past research has similarly found that role model relationships inculcated in victims their role of wife and/or mother as means of evaluating their self-worth (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004).

Something not discussed by past researchers was the use of others in making sense of their victimization. Victims' narratives revealed that they made sense of their victimization through dramatis personae who witnessed or were told about an act of

violence. Non-heroes responded unsupportively when they hindered the victim's ability to identify their experience as victimization, such as the crowd not responding to Whitney's victimization outside the movie theater.

The cycle of violence, originally identified by Walker (1979) was discussed in some of the victims' narratives. As noted previously, the cycle of violence has three stages: the tension-building stage, the acute battering stage, and the honeymoon period. A common theme among the victims' narratives was their inability to see this pattern until they were out of the violent relationship.

Some victims identified specific moments, or breaking points, which marked a shift in the mindset of the victim, either internally or externally, and enabled them to eventually get out of the violent relationship or experience. An internal breaking point comes from the woman's own understanding of her situation, such as a shift in thinking, while an external breaking point was a perpetrator's actions, or someone else's response to those actions. Brosi & Rolling (2010) had a similar finding only they referred to the moment of mindset shift as turning points as opposed to breaking points.

Another type of non-hero discussed by the victims' narratives were those that tried, but failed to be supportive in the mind of the victim. Some of these dramatis personae had good intentions, such as physically being there for the victims, but offered no emotional comfort, even leaving the victim feeling more isolated in her experience. The victims' narratives also revealed non-heroes as those who blamed the victims, did not believe the victim about her experience, made the victim feel badly or guilty about her experience, aided in her victimization, and judged the woman on her experience. Past

research has not provided much information regarding those who had a negative influence on victims of violence against women.

The victims' narratives also revealed supportive others [heroes] as those who provided comfort and aid to the victims emotionally, physically, or financially. The victims' narratives revealed supportive behaviors as validating a victim's feelings, non-judgmental responses, physical support, emotional support, shared experiences, aid in healing and recovery. Past research has found that social support is one of the most influential aids in getting a victim out of an abusive relationship, as well as in coping afterwards (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). Similarly, Littleton and Henderson (2009) found social support was a crucial aid in healing and coping for victims of sexual assault.

Some victims of IPV also revealed that it took them several attempts to successfully leave an abusive relationship. This is a similar finding to past research, which purports that a battered woman returns to her abuser, on average, between five and seven times before she escapes for good (Walker, 1979; Berlinger, 2001; Weiss, 2004). Some of the victims also noted gaining strength through the act of repetitive leaving that led them to be able to leave their abuser for good.

Victims' narratives also discussed the repercussions, or consequences, of the violence they experienced. Repercussions of victimization were identified as physical ailments, such as migraines, nightmares, and flashback; taking precautions to avoid further violence; distracters, such as work or drugs; a greater fear for their personal safety; self-blaming; and issues with men and/or relationships. It is often assumed that a victim of IPV will enter into another abusive relationship after she leaves her batterer, yet this was only the case for one woman in this study. Past research has also discussed the

repercussions victims of violence against women experience. Ferraro and Johnson (1983) found that living in constant fear caused victims physical, psychological, and emotional repercussions. These included “aches and fatigue, stomach pains, diarrhea or constipation, tension headaches, shakes, chills, loss of appetite, and insomnia” (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, p. 334). Sleutel (1998) also found that psychological abuse, such as undermining and devaluing a woman’s identity affected her self-esteem, due to the devastating feelings of inferiority triggered by such abuse. Past research has also found that IPV can be very damaging to a woman’s self-esteem (Sleutel, 1998; Senter & Caldwell, 2002), confidence (Walker, 1979; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983), and feelings of safety (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

Finally, the aftermath was described by the victims’ narratives as what takes place once they are out of a violent relationship or experience. Victims told stories of starting over, rebuilding their lives, finding new hope, finally feeling safe, or realizing they were not done healing. The aftermath demonstrated the ongoing experiences, emotions, and healing victims dealt with long after the violence is over. All of the victims’ narratives told of survival. Though all of the women began their narratives as victims, they ended as heroes by sharing their experiences and helping to generate greater knowledge in the public discourse on the realities of victims of violence against women.

The reality is violence can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Victims do not have any special characteristics. They come from both happy and violent households, as well as those in between. Victims of violence against women should be thought about in the same way we think about victims of war or natural disasters. Their experiences, of course, changed them, but their victimization was nothing they brought on themselves.

News media, and therefore the public, put victims into certain “boxes.” One of the reasons they do this may be to ease their fear of becoming victims themselves. They do not want to believe that it could happen to them. But the reality is that it can and does happen to anyone, regardless of who she is, what she looks like, how much money she makes, how well educated she is, where she works, or where she lives. Victimization is not a reflection on the victim.

Interestingly, the academic research conducted by Social Work and Nursing fields has generated a view of the realities of victims of IPV that aligns with what the victims’ narratives tell about their experiences. Though there do seem to still be some holes in the realities (i.e., influence of non-heroes), for the most part research exists that shows the reality of what a victim of IPV experiences. The disconnect lies between the media and this research. The information has not made its way between these two sectors. Although the research and knowledge exist in academia, the victims’ own words are seldom displayed in the public discourse, such as personal published narratives. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the realities of sexual assault. As well as the lack of victims’ stories in media and public discourse, there is also minimal research on the lived realities of victims of sexual assault/rape.

This is one of the reasons Alice’s book is so valuable. As brought up in chapter 3, Alice’s book does weigh the narrative in a particular direction. However, I do not feel that this biases the interpretation due to the qualitative design of this research. Alice’s memoir is one of the only personal published narratives on the lived experience of rape. The lack of personal stories of victimization of sexual assault and rape does not mean that they should be left out of research. Instead it displays that more stories need to be told so

that a greater understanding of these experiences and realities can be generated. Alice's story is not representative of every rape or sexual assault victim, but it doesn't need to be because the importance lies in telling her lived reality. Alice's story gives details and insight to the overarching narrative where others were not able to because of space and time constraints. Much of Alice's story and experiences do overlap with others. But Alice's heroic willingness to provide the details of her rape and all that followed provides insight into what others only hinted at in their narratives.

Another thing that stood out from the narratives was the prevalence of victims of IPV explaining what motivated them not to leave their abusive partner at the first sign of violence. Questioning why a victim didn't leave is common. This question displays the pervasiveness of victim blaming because it places the responsibility on the victim, as opposed to the perpetrator. The reality is that the situation is far more complicated than that question assumes. The perpetrator is someone who the victim is in a relationship with, possibly married to, and maybe even the father of her children. Ending a relationship or marriage is always complicated, difficult, and painful. It can be even more so for a woman who is in an intimate relationship with an abusive man. On top of all of the feelings that surround leaving a relationship, the woman is worried about her own personal safety, the safety of her loved ones, as well as the perpetrator. He may be hurting her, but she still loves him. He is not only a perpetrator to the victim, he is her significant other.

The victims' narratives revealed that their relationships did not always begin as abusive or violent. The relationships began as most relationships do; they dated, became a couple, fell in love, maybe got married or moved in together, and had a life together.

They trusted and loved each other until one day something changed. The first slap, punch, shove, or kick came as a shock; most victims described the violence as completely unexpected. It did not feel like abuse. It did not fit into the women's conception of "domestic violence" or violence against women. The women did not label their experiences as victimization because they did not fit into their understanding of a "victim" of violence against women or their partner did not fit with their conception of an abuser. It did not make sense, so the women changed their understanding of themselves, their relationship, and/or their abuse to make sense of their situation. Many began to have lower self-image, and saw themselves as untalented, unworthy, or even as deserving of the abuse their partners inflicted upon them. The unrealistic conceptions the women had about victims, perpetrators, and violence against women were sometimes drawn from media and public discourse.

Images and narratives portrayed in media are vital to understanding the public perception of violence against women. Media have a very negative impact on the way that the public understands violence against women and those who have lived through it. The frames and stereotypes perpetuated by the news media in particular have been found to have a negative, yet important impact on the public. The public view the news media as an accurate reflection of reality and are influenced by the stereotypes, myths, and portrayals that are dissipated (Burt, 1980; Carll, 2003; Carll, 2005; Dowler, 2006; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011). Violence against women is a complicated social issue that is even more complicated by the lack of realities and lived experiences present in pop culture and the news media.

With statistics as high as one in three women having been the victim of some sort of gender-based violence, it is evident that there are stories and personal experiences that have not been told. The amount of literature on the subject does not reflect the far-reach of this social issue. With the prevalence of these atrocities it seems reasonable to question why the lived experiences of victims of violence against women are not a part of public discourse. One reason may be the guilt and blame placed on women for their victimization. The victims' narratives revealed that women are very much still judged on their experience of victimization. The victims discussed not wanting to be seen by others as different or weak based on their experiences. But by disclosing their experiences of violence many are seen differently. Women who are brave enough to share their stories need to be portrayed as heroes because that is what they are. They are willing to say yes, I lived through violence and it changed me, but it does not reflect upon who I am or what I can do. In fact, being a victim oftentimes made these women push even harder to help others who are in the same position. By sharing their stories they helped to expand the knowledge base and understanding of the realities and experiences of victims of violence against women.

Being a victim of violence against women myself I brought to this study my own knowledge of victimization. My personal experiences of self-blame led me to sympathize with the need of the victims to seek out something they did wrong to try and avoid victimization in the future. I know how it felt to be ashamed, embarrassed, confused, and angry all at the same time. I understood not being able to label oneself as a victim, as well as what that label felt like once it had been established.

My standpoint pushed me to find the realities of other victims, to use their words and stories to help make sense of what is going on in our world. I, like the victims turned heroes in my thesis, am using my own experience of victimization as motivation to try to make a difference. All of these victims are also survivors and heroes; they all got out, started over, and shared their stories publicly. The victims' narratives revealed how difficult it was to share a personal story of victimization with others. They were oftentimes met with negative and unsupportive responses. As long as we live in a culture that tells women that our victimization is something we should be ashamed of the atrocities will not end. My hopes are that the lived realities of victims of violence against women will be more widely portrayed in media/public discourse; that victims will be met with less judgment and blame, and more understanding; and that more victims will be given the space and encouragement to share their stories. One in three women in the entire world (over 1 billion women) have been victims of violence against women. It is well past time for the true realities of victimization to be understood and portrayed. Only once these realities are understood can we put an end to violence against women. Education, knowledge, and awareness are truly the only ways to bring an end to these atrocities that has been a reality for so many women.

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