Breaking Away: A study of women who have received help from a local women’s shelter to escape a violent relationship.

Diane Catherine Amundsen

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Høgskolen i Oslo, Avdeling for samfunnsfag
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Diane Catherine Amundsen

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Oslo College University, Department of Social Sciences

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Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................3

Breaking away: A study women who have received help from a local woman’s shelter to escape a violent relationship. .................................................................6

1.0 Introduction ..................................................................................................................6
  1.1 Presentation of the articles ........................................................................................6
  1.2 Article 1. Valuable help: identifying best practice in social work with domestic violence survivors.................................................................7
  1.3 Article 2. Discourses of survival: A study of the discourses domestic violence survivors reveal in talking about coping and reestablishment ...............................7

2.0 Relevance for social work .........................................................................................8

3.0 Literature review...........................................................................................................9
  3.3 Kristin Berntsen. 2005. Hjelperens rolle i arbeid med voldsutsatte kvinner og deres barn. .........................................................................................................................10
  3.5 Kjersti Alsaker. 2008. Quality of life among women who have experienced intimate partner violence. A one year follow up study among women at Norwegian women’s shelters. University of Bergen, Norway. 11

4.0 Domestic Violence......................................................................................................12
  4.1 Consequences of Domestic Violence ......................................................................13

5.0 Coping after traumatic life experiences ....................................................................14

6.0 Women’s shelter as resource ...................................................................................15

7.0 Methods......................................................................................................................16
  7.1 Selection ..................................................................................................................18

8.0 Conclusion..................................................................................................................20
  9.0 Suggestions for further research .............................................................................21

References: .......................................................................................................................23

Valuable help: identifying best practice in social work with abused women..................25

Summary ..........................................................................................................................25

Introduction ......................................................................................................................26
  Research question: ..........................................................................................................27
  Background ......................................................................................................................27
  What is domestic violence? .............................................................................................28
  Finding help for victims of domestic violence .................................................................28

Interview method..............................................................................................................30

Theoretical approach: .....................................................................................................30

Analysis: Creating a system of recorded conversations ..................................................32

Results of the analysis: ...................................................................................................33
  Stopping the violence: .....................................................................................................33
  Guidance and Planning: .................................................................................................34
  Appropriate Goals: ...........................................................................................................35
Breaking away: A study women who have received help from a local woman’s shelter to escape a violent relationship.

1.0 Introduction
Each year approximately 1,800 women live temporarily at a women’s shelter in Norway, just under half of this number have children staying along with them. While Norway is a relatively egalitarian society, the prominence of domestic violence is greater than one might expect. In May 2005, the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) conducted a survey of domestic violence. The report states that, among the women who participated in the random survey, more than one in four (27%) said that she had been exposed to violence in a current or previous relationship.

This framing document is presented as a part of a Master thesis in Social Work from Oslo College University. The goal of this study has been to learn more about women who have experienced domestic violence and sought help from the local women’s shelter. This thesis is made up of this document and two additional articles. The first article takes a user perspective on what should be considered as best practice, and the second article identifies discourses that effect women’s choices and possibilities in the reestablishment period after ending a violent relationship.

The data for this thesis has been collected by two students, in cooperation with Oslo College University, and a local women’s shelter where both students work on a 50% basis. In working at the shelter I naturally heard many tough stories, and also shared in the users triumphs in the past two years. This made me wonder how these women cope after leaving the shelter, and what the staff at the shelter does which helps them the most along the way. Through the use of qualitative interviews we collected information regarding 5 women at two different points in their process. The main theme of these interviews was how the women coped after leaving their relationship, and what the women considered to be valuable help.

1.1 Presentation of the articles
As previously stated this thesis is divided into three parts; two research based articles, and this framing document which connects the research and covers different aspects of the study.

which were not covered sufficiently within the articles. It should also be noted that the basic study was performed by two students with the cooperation of a local women’s shelter.

1.2 Article 1. Valuable help: identifying best practice in social work with domestic violence survivors
This article takes a user perspective of what the participants identify as best practice regarding the help they received from the shelter. The theoretical approach used in the article is Best Practice theory as described by Ferguson (2007). This approach moves the focus from the commonly used deficit model to a strengths based approach. Focus is placed on what works in a given situation, and uses a grounded theory model to build up the theory from the results of the study. Although the most usual method for discussing best practice comes from interviews with practitioners who tell about an experience where they feel the work and results have been positive, I was interested in hearing what the women as users had to say. Was the work that was done at the shelter helpful to them, and if so how?

There were of course many different ways to approach this question, but choices had to be made regarding what focus I would place on the interview information. Much of the previous studies I have read use a deficit model which tells us a lot about what doesn’t work and what may need to be changed. I wanted to approach this problem from the opposite direction and find out what was helpful. Use of the interview data had seemingly endless possibilities and selections needed to be made as far as what to include in the articles. In most cases there were several examples and possibilities; however choices were made based on the examples which were most clearly stated.

The article focuses on what the users identified as meaningful in the contact between themselves and the shelter. The question which the article will investigate is:

*What do clients of the battered women’s shelter regard as valuable help in their efforts to break the cycle of violence and establish a safe home?*

1.3 Article 2. Discourses of survival: A study of the discourses domestic violence survivors reveal in talking about coping and reestablishment
The second article uses discourse analysis to identify some of the ideas or themes which were repeated in the participant’s interviews. Here I am interested in learning something about how
everyday discourses affect their decisions during the change process. The women who choose to leave their homes, experience a sudden change in their role and existence. Although this change is preferable to the abuse it also leads to new challenges.

Through Foucault’s definition of discourse and theory of power, combined with Butler’s theory of performative gender, I will highlight four discourses common for the participant’s interviews and examine how they may affect the women’s coping. The question this article will consider is:

*How do gendered discourses expressed by domestic violence survivors affect their actions and opportunities during the reestablishment process after leaving the relationship?*

### 2.0 Relevance for social work

These two articles are intended for anyone who is interested in learning more about domestic violence and how to help women who have been abused. In order to give the best possible support to these women it can be helpful to understand their situation, challenges and opportunities from different angles.

It is no accident that I have taken both a practical approach and a social scientific approach to the same data. This is with the intention of understanding the interviews on different levels. As social workers the practical approach of how to help, and what to do which gives results is significant in choosing strategies for helping individuals in similar situations. On the other hand understanding the discourses in society which create the circumstances which the individual lives under gives another dimension to the work. It takes the view of the situation from an individual focus to a larger societal view and reminds us of the context in which the individual can act.

Both articles are written for possible submission to the academic journal *Violence Against Women*, Sage publications. On their web page information the journal is described as follows:

As an international journal, one of the goals of Violence Against Women is to unravel that thread by shedding light not only on forms of violence that are already widely discussed but also on lesser known forms of violence, such as dowry murders, female
circumcision, enslavement for sex tourism, and rape as a weapon of war. Topics recently covered in the journal have included: Sexual Assault/Coercion, Domestic Violence, Hate Crimes, Corporate Violence, Wife Rape, Pornography, Acquaintance Rape, Lesbian Battery, Female Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Harassment

3.0 Literature review
In the process of writing this paper and the two articles which accompany it I have read through countless articles, reports, and books on relevant studies, theory and projects. I have tried to put in references to the most relevant sources throughout the texts, but much of the information comes from a collected knowledge and I often have read information several places. Here I will give a short summary of the books and reports which have been central in the general background on the subject of domestic violence, coping, and following up women who have experienced domestic violence. A brief summary of theory on violence, coping, and the women’s shelter as a source of help will follow.

Isdal is a psychologist who works with the treatment of violent behaviour and aggression. As leader of the treatment centre, Alternative to violence (Alternativ til vold) he has treated hundreds of men who wish to change their violent behaviour. This book is one which the women’s shelter uses to help explain the violence, and why it occurs. Why do men turn to violence? How did this behaviour begin and how can it be changed? What is lying behind the violent behaviour? By moving back and forth between examples and explanations the book attempts to help us better understand violence. Both power and powerlessness play a role in the abusers actions, and create a cycle which can in some cases be broken. I have used this book to understand violence from both the abuser’s position as well as the victim’s.

This is a guide for working with abused women of minority background. Skogøy has done previous research with minority groups and has written a report on a housing collective for minority women who have been threatened by, or taken part in, forced marriages. Work with this group showed that many of these women were quite young, had little experience in living

2 http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId=Journal200837&level1=H00&currTree=Subjects&
on their own, and some had only been in Norway a short period of time. Many had lived with violence and threats over longer periods. There was a need for a safe place for them to learn new skills for living on their own in a supportive environment.

Skogøy shares her experience to give a better understanding of some of the special problems women of minority background may face in leaving an abusive relationship or family. Cultural background plays a central part of an individual’s identity and understanding of the world. Many of the women who require help from the shelter have a collective view of society, as opposed to the individualistic view which is common in Norway and much of the west. In working with women of a minority background it is important to have an understanding of that they may have different values and norms then the dominant society. Skogøy gives a good description of the many challenges which this diverse group can encounter as well as advice on how to meet their needs.

3.3 Kristin Berntsen. 2005. Hjelperens rolle i arbeid med vodsutsatte kvinner og deres barn. Berntsen has her background in working with abused women and children as a counsellor for Oslo Crisis Centre. This is a guide for employees of the shelter on how to perform their helper role. The document gives a brief description of types of violence, consequences of violence and the diverse problems which the shelter encounters in working with abused women and families. It also gives an explanation of the centre’s core values and methods.

Central in the shelter work is the value help to self sufficiency. The helper role is backed by a belief in user participation and empowerment. Help for women who have experienced violence is considered best in teaching them how to tackle their daily challenges. The crisis centre promotes the idea that the client should be engaged in developing her own recovery process, defining her situation, and deciding how to change it. The guide contains concrete information on the help which is provided by most shelters as well as the theoretical background it is based on. It also provides easy to find information for guidance in practical situations.

3.4 Wenche Jonassen og Frøydis Eidheim. 2001. Den gode vilje. Mishandlede kvinners erfaring med hjelpeapparatet. Norsk Institutt for by og regionforskning (NIBR). Oslo. This report is the result of a combination of quantitative and qualitative research on the type and quality of help that battered women receive from the local, governmental, and voluntary
help systems. The report includes 9 stories from a selection of participants and discusses common situations these women must cope with in their private lives. It then goes on to describe the assistance that they have, or have not, received from the different services including the health system, psychiatric support, legal advice, police assistance, social services, family assistance office, and the women’s shelter. Here one is able to find a good deal of information on the available help from the shelter, and how the women in this project rated the help they received.

Since the topic is similar to my own research, this was useful for comparison with the results from my study. In addition this report has a section on the participant’s advice and suggestions to official agencies on how to improve their services for abused women. The factors which led to good help in the conclusion of this report included (1) the helpers attitude and understanding of abuse; (2) knowledge regarding which services were available, which strategies were smart, and solutions others had used; and (3) experience in working with domestic violence, knowledge about violence in general and suggestions for solutions and alternatives in the change process.

3.5 Kjersti Alsaker. 2008. Quality of life among women who have experienced intimate partner violence. A one year follow up study among women at Norwegian women’s shelters. University of Bergen, Norway.

Alsaker has presented this as her doctoral dissertation (dr.polit.) for the University in Bergen. She is also interested in how women cope after experiencing intimate partner violence, but approaches the question with a quantitative study. She uses two quality of life questionnaires to examine the long term effects of intimate partner violence on women’s health. This study on quality of life is similar in subject to my own study, on coping and valuable help, and therefore interesting for comparative reasons.

In the conclusion of Alsaker’s study she found that women who experienced violence had a significantly lower quality of life score then those who didn’t. In addition she found a strong association between physical violence and bodily symptoms one year after the violence, and makes an argument for better screening for intimate partner violence at doctor’s offices and emergency rooms. Additionally she argues for better institutional health services for this group, especially those who have experienced the most violence. This article was interesting in its general findings as well as learning how others have measured similar qualities to those I am working with.
4.0 Domestic Violence
Domestic violence is here defined as any act or threat of action which is used by one person in a relationship to control or harm another person. This includes any action which willingly causes pain, frightens or causes emotional discomfort and which causes this person to do something against their will, or to stop doing something they wish to do (Isdal 2000). The difference between domestic violence and other kinds of violence is that the abuser is a partner, husband, or family member. The violence occurs within the private sphere of the home or family life.

Råkil (2002) divides violence into physical abuse (hitting, pushing, shoving, choking, etc.), psychological abuse (threats, insults, excessive jealousy, accusations, and humiliating or controlling behaviour), sexual violence (unwanted or forced sexual activity) and financial abuse. When violence continues in a relationship over time and can be categorised as a pattern it is referred to as abuse or battering (Isdal 2000).

Domestic violence or abuse by way of threats, force, restricting freedom of movement, physical violence or other forms of brutality or humiliation are illegal in Norway and may be persecuted under penal code §219. These acts are punishable by imprisonment of up to 3 years, 6 years if the result is serious injury or death.

All of the participants in this study have been victims of physical and psychological abuse, while some of the victims also experienced financial abuse. While it is likely that some of the participants also experienced sexual abuse this theme was not discussed due to the sensitive nature of this form for violence.

Financial abuse is another form which affects many of the women who contact the shelter. If a woman is kept from participating in the work force and is financially dependent on her spouse or family she is especially vulnerable (Skogøy 2008). She may not be given enough money by her partner for food and clothing, as well as other necessities for herself or her children. Other women who are able to work may discover that her abuser takes control of her money, questions her expenses and is suspicious of people which she has contact with during the work day. In the western countries, and Norway especially, being totally out of control of your own economic situation can be experienced as painful, powerless, and humiliating (ibid).

3 Lovdata.no
Violence against women is a problem that reaches across all social levels and societies around the world (Dobash & Dobash 1992). Norway has taken initiative to help end or prevent violence in the home through new laws, promoting social equality and giving governmental support to women’s shelters, also known as crisis centres, throughout the country (NOU 2008:4).

Minority women can be especially vulnerable due to several factors. Their cultural background may make these women more dependent on their families then is common for Norwegians. Women who have come to Norway through marriage, or have brought their husband into the country in this way, are also especially vulnerable because they risk being sent out of the country, or may believe this is a risk (Skogøy 2008). If their abuser is dependent on them for citizenship they may experience death threats if they report the violence to the authorities and risk getting their abuser sent out of the country.

In some countries entrance to Western Europe is highly valued and several family members may be dependent on money sent from the west back to their homeland (Skogøy 2008). Women who are admitted to Norway through marriage to a Norwegian man are sometimes also at risk for abuse. These women often have little understanding of the legal system in Norway, and their husband is considered the expert in all things Norwegian. If the husband is abusive he may threaten to revoke his sponsorship and send them back, neglect or refuse to renew their visa, or give them false information about their legal rights (ibid). Many women have a real fear of being sent home to their country of origin. They may have a family there which will not take them back, or cannot afford to take them back (Berntsen 2008). They may have others in their homeland which are dependent on them for financial help, or they may be stigmatized or even in danger if they divorce and return to their homeland in disgrace.

4.1 Consequences of Domestic Violence
Women living in a home under the constant threat of violence are affected by the situation on many levels. The individual long term effects vary with personal qualities, the amount, frequency and type of violence experienced and the support network surrounding the individual (Alsaker 2008). The women who I interviewed were affected by the violence in multiple ways. All expressed a fear of contact with their abuser, stated that they were
uncomfortable living alone, and suffered in some degree of anxiety and a need to try and understand why this had happened to them.

According to Råkil (2002) women can experience psychological reactions, lasting physical injuries, and social disadvantages as a result of violence in their personal relationships. Common psychological reactions include restlessness, trouble sleeping, nightmares, feeling jumpy, a feeling of being numb or distant, and a low tolerance for stress. Experiencing anxiety and flashbacks is not unusual. Others experience concentration problems, memory problems, and difficulty in taking in new information. Over time depression and even suicidal thoughts may develop. Being exposed to domestic violence also seems to increase the instance of diffuse chronic illnesses such as fibromyalgia.

In addition the victim’s social network is often affected. Many women react to the violence by distancing themselves from friends and family (Isdal 2000). Their partners may have a need for control and directly inhibit contact with the network, or the woman may attempt to cover up the violence due to shame or guilt. Women who have long been a part of an abusive relationship and have been isolated with their abuser may develop a strong dependency on the abuser (ibid). The very person who inflicts the pain also becomes the only one who can comfort them and understand their situation.

5.0 Coping after traumatic life experiences

One focus of the qualitative study is how these women cope after their traumatic experiences. Primarily we have been looking for examples of effective coping and perceived control over the situation. Coping in this article refers to efforts or methods which individuals use to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stress. Two general coping strategies are defined by Folkman & Lazarus (1980) as problem-solving strategies, or efforts to do something which alleviates the stressful circumstances, and emotion-focused strategies which consist of efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful events. Most individuals use both types of coping strategies on a regular basis without being aware that they are doing so.

While any tactic used for managing difficult circumstances, solve personal and interpersonal problems and master stress is potential coping (Johnson & Yanka 2004), we were particularly looking for strategies which gave positive outcomes. The coping definition I have used in this research is based on a salutogenic approach (Antonovsky 1979), which is a wellness
orientated approach as opposed to pathogenic, or sickness orientated approach. This approach sees each person as having their own inborn potential for success, and can assist the helper in focusing on untapped potential within the individual and their environment to help them tackle difficult circumstances (Gjærum 2004).

The ability to cope with difficult situations is closely related to the concept of resilience, which is defined as the ability to thrive despite difficult situations. Rutter (1985) has studied resilience in children and observed that resilience has three central qualities. Resilience to stress is relative, which means it is dependent on the situation and circumstances the individual is faced with. The basis of resilience is environmental and individual; this means it is dependent on both the surroundings the individual lives as well as personal qualities. Lastly resilience is not a fixed quality, but varies over time and in different situations. In other words coping ability changes with the context of the situation, and the accumulated press on the individual.

What this study wishes to learn about is a description of how the participants cope or tackle their challenges. What does the participant do to win over stressful situations? It must also be seen in relation to the context of the situation and which options are available for action (ibid).

Throughout the interviews the participants gave examples of how they coped with stress in their situation. Some of the examples which were named are; 1) finding roommates which could help with financial difficulties and at the same time combat the fear of living alone, 2) physical activity such as running and bicycling to combat anxiety and stress, 3) comforting treatments when stressed such as taking a shower or bath, 4) Talking with friends, family, or their personal contact at the shelter and 5) listening to calming music. To combat anger one woman told us that she threw her clothes on the floor or hit pillows. While another participant told us that she worked as much as possible to avoid being lonely. Some women also found it helpful to focus on what they have, try to keep a positive attitude, and give their attention to remaining family members such as their children.

6.0 Women’s shelter as resource
Battered women’s shelters are a vital resource for women who experience domestic violence. Shelters vary in the services they provide but most offer some combination of a crisis hotline, advocacy, counselling, and an emergency shelter. The 24 hour hotline is available for abused
women, or concerned family and friends to speak with a professional about their situation and receive information and advice regarding available help (Jonassen & Eidheim 2001). In addition the shelter provides a safe refuge for women if they need to leave their homes, as well as professionally staffed counselling services to help them deal with the violence they have experienced.

Advocacy services are provided which help women find their way through the often complicated bureaucracy and assist them in making contact with necessary services to assure income, a safe place to live, legal assistance, and help in obtaining orders of protection and safety alarms, if needed, from the police (ibid).

The shelter where we conducted our interviews also offers a follow-up service which includes continued counselling, support groups, and classes on violence and its effects. For some women this is an important part of regaining control over their life and maximising their coping after leaving the violent relationship. Services are also used by women who have chosen to stay in the relationship and try to maintain their marriage while their partner receives help. Others use this service while preparing to leave an abusive spouse if the situation is secure enough for them to form an escape plan while living at home.

One basic principal in the functioning of the shelter is “help self sufficiency.” This is based on the self help movement and the idea that it is better for a person to learn how to cope with a situation then to be handed a solution. In the shelter tradition it is based on the concept of women helping women as equals (Jonassen & Eidheim 2001). The staff helps the women to define their own problem and their needs, prioritise and make informed decisions in a supportive environment.

7.0 Methods
The local women’s shelter was chosen as a starting point to come in contact with women who were victims of Domestic Violence for several reasons. It was likely that enough participants could be found there to complete the study. In addition as an employee of the centre I have a good relationship with the staff and management, engagement in the field of work, and a prior understanding of how this shelter approaches its clientele.
I had contacts within the centre that could help by referring participants to the study. For ethical reasons we did not approach the clients ourselves regarding the research, instead they were asked to participate by a third party. If they agreed we then contacted them to set up an interview. The principal behind this was that participation should be voluntary, and the women might feel more freedom to refuse if desired when the study was explained to them by a third party.

The original goal was to have eight participants. While the intention was that five would be a good number, it would have been an advantage to have extra participants in the event that some did not return for the second interview. In the first two weeks of recruiting it was relatively easy to find participants, however the shelter then experienced an increase in workload and at the same time two central staff members fell ill. It was then that finding new participants became a challenge. In the end we had five participants and made the decision that this was an acceptable number. Fortunately we were able to interview all of the participants for the desired two interviews, although one interview needed to be performed by telephone as the women had relocated outside the area.

The recruiting period was limited due to the time factor involved. It was desirable to have all the interviews completed by the end of October so that it would be possible to complete the follow-up interviews early enough to meet the project’s deadline. In order to complete two interviews with each participant, including the 3 months waiting time in between, plus transcribe, analyze, and write the articles it was necessary to hold a relatively strict progress plan.

In depth interviews were conducted, with the help of an interview guide, in order to give the users a voice in the research. By focusing on interpreting the women's experiences it is possible to come closer to the core of what they felt they needed in the crisis situation and afterwards. Such experience is difficult to measure in quantitative data, and it was my desire to explain it with the user’s own words.

Much of the available research on domestic violence is based on quantitative studies. The shelter we used, like most others, registers statistics of their users through a standard registration form. This data includes for example age, marital status, type of violence, relationship with abuser, and the number of days living at the shelter. This data is collected
anonymously to lay the foundation for funding of the centre as well as for use in further research (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2008).

While this study is not large enough to represent the total population, the users’ narratives had much in common and are consistent with studies of similar nature, as presented in the literature section of this paper. Although the study may not be generalised directly, the findings may be used to inspire further research and are a good basis for academic discussions.

As an employee of the shelter I was in the challenging position of studying the felt in which I myself work. It is always difficult to study your own professional culture, as this can present difficulties in objectivity. It has been my intention to analyze the material in a thorough and systematic way, and position myself outside the data. Although total objectivity is not possible, nor desirable, I have attempted to examine the data from my role as a student rather than employee. While I had met all of the participants previously in the daily comings and goings at the shelter, none of the women which were interviewed were clients that I had significant contact with.

It can also be seen as an advantage to have a solid background and understanding of working with domestic violence, and a certain engagement in the problem. At the deepest level it was my own interest in becoming a better social worker, and increasing my own understanding of violence against women which fuelled my desire and interest in this subject.

7.1 Selection
The selection of informants was made up of 5 women who have experienced violence in their personal relations, and who lived at the shelter during the months of September and October 2008. For practical reasons we asked the employees to recruit women who were able to speak English or Norwegian, had lived at the centre for a period of at least one week, and were of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Three of the women who responded to our study were of minority background, while two were Norwegian. The group was also diverse in partner form, the abusers relationship to the participant, age, race, religion, and whether or not they had children.
Since the group of women we interviewed is so diverse the most practical way to introduce them is through a short presentation of each participant. The names and identifying details have been changed to protect the individual:

Angelina is just under 30 years old and comes from a country in South America. Her parents are Norwegian and South American so she has Norwegian citizenship although she has lived most of her life outside the country. Two years ago she moved to Norway along with her new husband. Since he was an immigrant Angelina needed to work hard to provide for the two of them and to prove to the immigration office that they would be self sufficient. She expected that he would soon help with the earnings but this did not happen. After one year he began having relationships with other women, often friends of Angelina, and became psychologically abusive. Over time this developed into physical abuse, and Angelina suffered economical losses as well while struggling to provide for them both on two jobs. She learned of the shelter through a co-worker and began in the violence information classes. It was through the classes that she finally admitted that she was in an abusive relationship and sought refuge at the shelter. Angelina is well educated and does not yet have any children.

Anna is just under 30 years old and is ethnically Norwegian. She sought refuge at the shelter when escaping a relationship with a violent boyfriend. When she first came to the shelter she described herself as feeling tired, confused, and totally broken down. She had a tremendous need for comfort and states that she talked with most every staff member she came in contact with, both day and night. Her boyfriend misused alcohol and narcotics and was physically and psychologically abusive. She began to regain control after she decided to press charges with the police. At the time of the second interview she was still attempting to cope with the psychological effects of her abusive experience.

Helene was another Norwegian participant in the study. Just over 30 years in age, she was referred to the shelter through child protective services after being physically and psychologically abused by her partner while pregnant. Her partner was excessively controlling and jealous and had a history of previous abusive behaviour with an earlier partner. During a planned interview with child protective she admitted to the abuse that she had received and asked them for help. Her oldest son stayed with his father (not the abuser) the two months she lived at the shelter so that she had time to work out her situation and recover. She visited her son on the weekends and was satisfied that he had a stable situation.
In addition she needed to work through a reorientation process in planning for the future for the new baby. She also chose to press charges against her abuser and required an order of protection and a safety alarm in order to live outside the shelter.

Farida is approximately 25 years old and has a 2 year old son. She comes originally from the Middle East and a rather different family formation then in the west. In her home country the parents often arrange marriages for their children. It is not unusual that they marry within their larger family, as is the case with Farida. She moved to Norway as a child and has gone to Norwegian schools, but was pressured to drop out in her last year of high school because it was time for her to marry. Farida was physically and psychologically abused by her husband and his family, especially her mother in law. The couple lived with her husband’s family as is normal in their culture. His family therefore also had a good deal of control over her situation. After a particularly violent argument Farida was thrown out in the street by her husband without any money or supplies, and upon contacting another relative for help she received death threats from her husband who said she would pay for the trouble she had caused. She was referred to the shelter by the police when she contacted them for protection.

Sara is of African descent, single and in her early 20’s. She is the only member of the study who is not abused by a partner or husband. Her family emigrated from Africa while she was a child, and she has spent most of her life in Norway, attended Norwegian schools and adjusted in many ways to the Norwegian lifestyle. Unfortunately her family did not appreciate her western style, and she was abused most of her life first by her parents, and then by her brother. Sara came to the shelter after contacting the police and reporting her brother’s abuse. She described herself as being “safer out in the city streets at 3 am on a Saturday night” then she was in her own home. She has since limited her contact with her family, although she has not broken contact completely.

8.0 Conclusion
Research by the Krisesentersekretariat, Statistics Norway (SSB) and Norske Institutt for by-og regionforskning (NIBR) show that the problem of domestic and family violence is prevalent also in Norway, and the need to fight such violence continues. Although changes over the last 30 years have given the country a more equal society in regards to gender roles, we must not be blind to the social problems which still exist. There is good reason to develop
and strengthen the professional helper’s knowledge and skills on domestic violence, screening for violence and necessary follow up for abused women in order to eventually eradicate the problem.

In this paper I have introduced the theme of domestic violence (for more information on this subject please see my article Discourses of survival: A study of the discourses domestic violence survivors reveal in talking about coping and reestablishment). I then introduced the two articles which I have written as a part of this Master thesis. The articles take up two very different sides of the same situation and highlight the challenges and possibilities which the interview participants faced.

Further I have provided a general review of the literature which provides the background for these two articles, and an overview of the methods used in the qualitative study. Lastly I have introduced you to the study participants. Five brave women who have shared their stories and experiences in order to help others in the future. I hope this work will be useful to others in the field and other students interested in the subject. In closing I will present two suggestions for further projects which could help to reduce the incidence of domestic violence, or aid in the treatment of the consequences.

9.0 Suggestions for further research

Further research regarding domestic violence is recommended in several areas. In the United States several local projects have begun which attempt to intervene in domestic violence cases at an earlier point in time. One example is the CDCP Domestic Violence Intervention Project which is based on a follow up visit a short time after any domestic violence call to the police. Follow up visits include a safety check, to see if the family is doing okay, an opportunity for counselling, to give information in a more calm environment, and serves as a reminder to the abuser (if he is living in the home) that the incident is considered a criminal act. This program has shown preliminary results in the decrease of repeated incidents.

In addition it would be a worthy project to implement an active follow up program for women who have experienced domestic violence which included home visits and regular contact which is NOT based on the women contacting the centres. Many may feel that it is difficult to contact the centres when they have moved out, as they wish to be strong and manage on their own. However they may not have been prepared for the continued process and reactions
which they may have after violence. Any person going through a family break up goes through a grief and loss process, having been in an abusive situation can complicate this process significantly.
References:


CDCP Domestic Violence Intervention Project http://www.nccev.org/initiatives/dvi.html


Valuable help: identifying best practice in social work with abused women

Summary
In this article, valuable help: identifying best practice in social work with abused women, the focus is placed on the user’s definition of beneficial services provided by a battered woman’s shelter. The article is based on a qualitative study in which women were interviewed regarding their experiences leaving an abusive relationship. The intention of the interviews was to learn what the users considered to be valuable during their transformation process.

The theoretical perspective of the article is known as best practice. This concept as used in the article is based on Ferguson’s (2007) method which places the focus on where social work has had a positive outcome, or is considered to be a success. Although best practice is most commonly used when the worker identifies a situation where he or she perceives the work as successful, in this study it is the user who is in focus. The participants described situations where they felt successful, supported, or strengthened and identified best practice based on their own experiences.

The qualitative interviews were transcribed and cross analysed in order to find similarities in the participant’s encounters with the shelter. Five categories were then identified which the beneficial experiences could be sorted into. These five categories include 1) stopping the violence, 2) guidance and planning, 3) appropriate goals, 4) strengthening networks and avoiding relapse, and 5) practical help.

The results showed that all of the women mentioned the safety aspect of the shelter as being significant. Physical refuge and having an alternative to returning home was rated as important to the users. Next is the category of guidance, sorting and planning which all of the users mentioned as being a necessary part of regaining control over a chaotic situation. Further help in setting appropriate goals was seen as useful. The starting point for the users varied, so setting appropriate goals required patience, flexibility, and individual focus on the part of the social workers. All of the participants also worked on their network in some way. The majority relied on their existing network for help, but some of the participants also found the shelters opportunities for creating new network connections as valuable. Lastly practical help was considered important by the participants. Although the need for help varied based on the individual all of the users reported relying on the shelter for some form of practical help.
Introduction
The theme of this article is what five study participants who have lived at a local battered women’s shelter consider to be valuable of the help they received. Focus is placed on what the users of the centre deem to be helpful through a qualitative interview process. Although professionals at the shelter do many things to help their users, looking at the services from the women’s perspective may give us valuable information as to where to place emphasis in the future to empower and strengthen abused women in general.

This article is based on a qualitative study performed at a local battered women’s shelter in Norway with the primary objective of learning how these women cope after leaving a violent relationship, and which of the services they have received are regarded as most helpful. Five women from the shelter volunteered to share their experiences with us.

One major theme throughout the interview process was the concept of best practice in regard to giving valuable help. We were interested in learning what women who had used the shelter considered valuable of the services they received. While each person’s perception of what is valuable is individual, common themes were identified and are comparable with the results of larger studies such as Jonassen and Eidheim’s (2001) study of abused women’s experience with the official help system in Norway. As such they may be used as a basis for theoretical discussions and practical learning regarding how to provide good and effective services in similar situations. One of the motivations for interviewing the women at two different points in their process was to observe if the participant’s concept of valuable help changed over time, or was consistent both before moving out and three months afterwards.

In this article I will first present background for my interest in the theme and show how this is relevant for social work with domestic violence victims. I will also give a condensed review of domestic violence as a social problem in Norway. In the next section I will describe briefly the interview process and describe the theoretical perspective of the article, best practice. In the analysis section of the article I will present information regarding how the interview data was further organised and the responses were divided into five categories. Further I will discuss the results of the analysis and end the article with a conclusion which briefly summarises the results of the research.
Research question:
In working with domestic violence much of the practice is based on the personal contact’s professional experience. They have a lot of contact with their clients while they are living at the shelter. I am interested in examining what exactly it is the social workers do which is most valuable to the clients. My research question is therefore:

What do clients of the battered women’s shelter regard as valuable help in their efforts to break the cycle of violence and establish a safe home?

Background
The following study is significant to social work as it is important to learn more about what kinds of assistance contribute to best practice in the change process. How can social workers best assist women who have experienced violence to become independent of their abuser and succeed in establishing a better life for themselves and their children? In many cases this requires the women to find the strength and skills to establish safe homes, and achieve a reasonable economy to prevent relapse into continued violence. The women who participated in the interviews can help us identify what was helpful in their process, which then can be used to help others.

In 2007 over 1800\(^4\) women stayed at women’s shelters in Norway, just under half of these had children with them. While domestic violence is given more attention by the government then it once was, it is still a largely invisible problem. Violence against women and girls includes physical, sexual, psychological and economical abuse. It is often referred to as gender based violence because of the woman’s lower status, even in western societies, which allows such abuse to be legitimimized, swept under the carpet, or treated as a familial problem.

“The same acts that would be punished if directed at an employer, a neighbour, or an acquaintance often goes unchallenged when men direct them at women, especially within the family. (Population information program, 1999:1)”

This statement is quite shocking when you think about it. One of the informants in the following study was repeatedly abused, verbally assaulted and locked in her room by her parents, and later her brother took over the role of perpetrator of violence. Imagine now if you will, what would happen if a stranger did exactly the same thing to your neighbour. I imagine you would be reading about this episode in the morning paper and that the perpetrator would be spending some time in prison. Meanwhile authorities responded to our participant’s situation by dropping the charges. Your neighbour would likely be believed if the assailant were a stranger, yet this young woman’s case is deemed as lacking evidence because she pressed charges against family members, in spite of the fact that she gave permission to the authorities to read her medical and psychological journals.

*What is domestic violence?*

The Crisis Centre Secretariat defines violence according to its many forms which their users have experienced (Lien & Nørgaard 2006). In addition to physical violence five other types are violence are specified.

- **Sexualised violence** – touching, feeling or other unwelcome bodily contact, forced or unwanted sexual acts, abusive language or name calling such as whore, cunt, bitch etc.
- **Economic violence** in which the abuser controls all the victim's financial resources, thereby maintaining a large degree of control over the victim.
- **Social violence** which includes limited contact with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours causing isolation. This isolation has two functions, the woman no longer receives correction from their surroundings, and she becomes more dependent on her abuser.
- **Psychological violence** includes threats, making fun of, ignoring, rejection, intimidation or humiliation. Many Victims say that psychological violence is the form which the vast majority of women consider the worst.
- **Materials violence** such as breaking things in anger, kicking or hitting things with the intention to intimidate, control, or humiliate.

*Finding help for victims of domestic violence*

While the majority of the women who move into shelters in Norway leave their violent partner, approximately 20% of the women choose to return to their homes and the abuser (Hirsch & Nørgaard 2007). While this must be seen as a valid choice, it is important to
believe in the possibility of change; the return should in fact be a choice and not a result of barriers to better alternatives. Economical barriers, isolation, or lack of reasonable living conditions can make living independently challenging, if not impossible, and make returning to an abusive home seem like the lesser of two evils. The women’s shelter assists abused women in making choices by providing them with information, safety planning, advocacy, and protection. As one participant stated;

*It’s terrible that this place is needed, but it is very good that it does exist when you need it!*

Until recently woman’s shelters have been the primary service supporting victims of domestic violence. The 51 woman’s shelters scattered throughout Norway have provided information, counselling, and guidance as well as providing a safe place for abused women and children to stay.

Norway began a new national action plan in 2000 which included proposals for new research and better cooperation between agencies in the fight against domestic violence. The action plan called "Violence against women, 2000-2003" includes an initiative for better cooperation within state agencies, municipalities, police, family counselling offices, and health services. In addition the plan includes measures which are aimed at increasing and funding research, teaching, and training of public employees to increase information regarding domestic violence and help to break down taboos which hinder families from getting help (Justis og politidepartementet 2000).

This work has been followed up with the action Plan "Violence in personal relationships 2004-2007" and the newest action plan against domestic violence in 2008-2011 titled "Turning point" which contains 50 concrete initiatives including further strengthening of cooperation, skills and knowledge regarding domestic violence. The plan also intends to ensure necessary assistance and protection for victims throughout Norway. In addition measures will be taken to strengthen the treatment of abusers in an effort to prevent further domestic violence.
**Interview method**

Each woman was interviewed twice in order to get a greater spectrum of her experiences. The first time was just before moving out of the shelter, and the second follow up interview was performed three months after leaving their abusive relationship. In total there were ten interviews, and all of the participants returned for the second interview. Each conversation was recorded on cassette tape and then transcribed into text to ease in cross analysis of the data. Since the material collected is sensitive in nature the cassettes were magnetically erased and all efforts have been made to disguise the identities of the participants. This means that names, places, and in some cases nationalities have been changed while maintaining the essential qualities of the data collected. All of the interviews were conducted in the Norwegian language. For the sake of making this article useful in international contexts, I have translated their statements into English. All translations are as literal as possible, but some minor changes have been made to phrasing and grammar in order for the statements to have the same meaning in English as they do in Norwegian. An interview guide has been used which is available as a supplement to the Master Thesis of which this article is a part.

**Theoretical approach:**

Much of the research done in the field of domestic violence traditionally involves examining the shortcomings of social work, legal systems, and non-profit organisations. This article would like to approach knowledge from the opposite direction. It is this article’s aim to take into use a strength-based, person-centred perspective known as *best practice* (Ferguson 2007). This theory is used to construct the research from an inductive, bottom-up approach (Dahle & Hennum 2008) by inviting the study participants to take an active part in identifying *best practice* used at the women’s shelter. The women were encouraged to tell about actions or situations where they felt supported, strengthened, or in general received valuable assistance from the women’s shelter. Emphasis was placed on discovering where the experience was perceived as a success. While many studies used the workers point of view to identify best practice in child protective cases, such as Solberg’s article on best practice in child protective casework (2008), it was my goal to take the point of view of the client. It was my intention to allow the client to define best practice for her own situation. After identifying which practices gave meaning for them, the women were asked to try and explain what it was about the service that was positive, in order to get a deeper understanding of their needs and how they were helped.
Ferguson (2007) emphasises that in many situations too much focus is placed on that which does not work. Social work has placed too much emphasis on a deficit model, highlighting obstacles instead of seeking out success where it can be found, in practice. Instead of setting the focus on the shelter’s limitations, it was my desire to use a perspective which places the focus on what works, with the simple idea of doing more of that which is meaningful to the client. Even if the end result is not a complete success, this does not mean that it is a complete failure either (Solberg 2008). Positive changes may have occurred along the way, and the process may need to go another round before a solution is discovered. We have to be willing to tap into the unused potential of the individual workers and clients in order to come up with client centred solutions (Ferguson 2007). I wish to shed light on what these women perceived as helpful in their specific situation and why.

In such complicated and multifaceted work it is important to understand that assistance must be person-centred and adjusted to the specific situation which is to be changed (Fook 2002). Each person’s assets, skills, talents, and tolerances are individual. The help given to any person must therefore be tailored to their needs, and the possibilities available within the given situation. Such a process requires flexibility, creativity and engagement on the part of both the social worker and the client (Dahle and Hennum 2008).

Personal experience and the relationship with the individual client is the basis for much of the work performed at the women’s shelter (Berntsen 2005). Here the aim is to help the clients transform their experiences into language, so that it may be shared with us and other practitioners who work with similar challenges (Dahle and Hennum 2008). The goal of this article is to make these knowledge and skills more openly available through best practice theory. In this way knowledge can be shared also with practitioners outside of social work and can contribute to development of new general theories.

Best practice theory opens up to the possibilities provided by untapped potential in both the worker and the client. While the social help system is moving in the direction of more and more specialisation and standardized solutions, it is important to take the hand of the client and together attempt to shed light on where best practice is found in the individual
circumstances (Ferguson 2007). The idea is to move from a problem orientated view to a solution orientated view and a more salutogenic perspective.

**Analysis: Creating a system of recorded conversations**

The basis of this article is ten qualitative interviews with users of a local woman’s shelter. It is a challenge to systematically analyse ten hours of conversation, however a system for organising the data was eventually created. The interview data has been reviewed in depth and across both participants and the point in time which the interview was taken. My first goal was to find similarities in what the interviews participants told us about receiving help from the shelter. Once patterns emerged I identified six categories for the responses, and organised the women’s responses into these. I then went through the interviews again and made notes under each category to get a better understanding of how often these were named and how important they appeared to be in the interviews. The following categories were used in the final organisation; a more detailed explanation of each will follow:

- Stopping the violence
- Guidance and planning
- Appropriate goals
- Strengthening Networks and avoiding relapse
- Practical help

Once this analysis was completed, the interviews were reread and focus was placed on differences between the first and second interview. Did the women still think the same things were important? Did things go as they expected after moving out? These were the kinds of questions I asked the data when reading through.

Reflection was also required over how, and how much I may have influenced the data we received. As an employee of the same women’s shelter it is always possible that the participants provide the answers which they believe are expected of them. However since the interviews took the form of a conversation, much of the data collected came within the clients own stories, and not directly as a response to questions on the theme of valuable help.

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5 Salutogene refers to Aaron Antonovsky’s (1977) theoretical approach which focuses on health and well-being, rather than on the factors which cause disease.
Results of the analysis:

Stopping the violence:
This category includes crisis help, feeling safe, and assurances that the women are making the right decision. All of the participants found the safety aspect of the shelter important, both during the first interview and at the time of the follow up interview.

Having a safe place to think, plan and make decisions was repeatedly expressed as important. Knowing that their abuser could not reach them in the shelter, that the address was secret, the doors were locked, and there was staff available 24 hours a day gave some of the women a sense of security that they had not had in years. Here the client expresses what this meant in her situation;

You see, I was less safe at home then I would have been walking the city streets at 3 a.m. on a Saturday night. So the opportunity to live here, and to experience what its like to have the normal life I should have had, it’s sort of…well I fell safe when I am here.

Others stated that it was good not to have to go home, or not to have to stay with family or friends and possibly put them in danger, as many abusers also threaten to harm anyone helping their victim as expressed here;

The most important was that I didn’t have to go home. And I didn’t have to stay with others I knew, so they wouldn’t be put into danger (…) Already while I was sitting with the police giving them my statement he contacted some of my friends, even though he had been issued an immediate order of protection.

One element of best practice can be identified as securing the woman’s (and children’s) safety, and helping them to calm down and take the time they need to make good decisions. It can’t be stated enough; having a safe place for a women to stay, to think, and to get information plain and simple saves lives.

Others told us that they had also been in contact with the shelter after moving out at times when they felt isolated or afraid. It is common to experience fear, anxiety, nightmares, or
depression after living in a relationship with violence (Bargai, Gershon & Shalev 2007). Several of the participants described to us a fear of being alone, a fear of men, or experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression during their follow up interview. One woman told us that she called the shelter after having some especially frightening nightmares. The helper listened to her fears, and was able to make her feel safe and understand that this was a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

**Guidance and Planning:**
The social workers who are employed by the women’s shelters are its primary resource. The shelter had no financial resources or material goods which it regularly gave to clients; however what they specialised in was giving understanding, acceptance, and advice. Some of the women told us that their personal contact helped them to identify and express their own feelings, which had been long repressed. Others told us that they received help in sorting out their complex situation with helped them make good choices. One woman gave us a very good example as follows;

*I really needed it when she said: Sara, I understand your situation, but now you have to do something. Its time to get to work. So you have to do this and you have to do that…I had to, I mean my personal contact told me to write a list after our meeting of what I had to get done. I could put it off for a day or two, but he list was in my room every day. I don’t have much to do here anyway, so all I had to do was look at the list.*

While she didn’t always get through the list immediately, it was always there reminding her of what she had to do. This is an example of sorting, prioritising, and motivation in one simple action.

This list made a strong impression on the girl, and she mentioned it again in her follow up interview. For her this was an example of best practice as it helped her move from feeling she was helpless to a self sufficient and empowered state. Each item she crossed of the list was another victory which proved she could be self reliant. In the end she was able to contact all the agencies and official offices she needed help from and find an apartment.

In her state of crisis this client needed that little push to activate her. Without being pushed this girl was in danger of slipping into a helpless, depressive state. The experience of her
personal contact told her that this girl could be prompted into action. Each successful activity was crossed off the list, and at the end of the period she had a list of accomplishments instead of challenges. As Berntsen (2005) states:

The women often need help to sort her various problems, so that her situation becomes clear and less overwhelming. In the next phase she may require help to prioritise which problems should be solved first. (Berntsen 2005:38)

This is a good example of how best practice is characterised by balancing the clients need for support and her need to be self reliant. Here the personal contact was available and supportive of the client, but she was able to do the work herself. Having experienced success from this safe environment enabled her to learn more about how to tackle official agencies when she needs to on her own. Supporting the client while she does the work is an example of help to self sufficiency. This is one of the core values of the shelter program. Not surprisingly this participant told us in her follow up interview that what she considered most helpful from her stay at the shelter was her appointments with her personal contact. She told us she felt strengthened by this experience.

Other women talked about their need for crisis help, the need to feel believed and understood, not to mention the need to learn that they are not the only person who has experienced this kind of abuse. Knowing that the shelter is available and that they can always call, visit or come back if necessary has been named in the follow up interviews as a giving the clients a sense of security after moving out of the shelter.

**Appropriate Goals:**
Another service the personal contact helps the client with is making an appropriate plan and setting goals. The trauma which the person has experienced can take up a lot of the woman’s thoughts and energy as she works through the grief and healing process. Planning helps to guide the clients focus into the future, to find out what needs to be done here and now to assure her safety, what needs to be done to get access to an adequate home, and to make sure that she has the economical means to take care of herself and her children when she moves out. Kjersti Alsaker (2008) who has recently written her doctor dissertation on the quality of life among women who have experienced intimate partner violence found that the abused women’s energy “is almost total absorbed in practical concerns” (Alsaker 2008; 67)
including permanent housing, financial stability and quality care for her children. As one young woman explained to us;

*First I have to find an apartment, get out of here. It's scary, but it has to be done. In the beginning I didn't want to be here (at the shelter), but now I don't want to leave. Yes, I will find an apartment and get my son into preschool again (...)then I will get out in the workforce and after a while begin to study. So we will just have to wait and see how it goes after that. I use all my time trying to find an apartment right now. It isn't easy, I have understood that much.*

Such plans must begin where the woman “is” in her specific situation (Schulman 2008). Here the client was forced by her circumstances to quit her last year of high school because her family pressed her into an arranged marriage. Although she was raised in another culture she must adjust to the Norwegian lifestyle since she is now raising her son as a single mother. The women we spoke with rated plans for their children, such as school or child care as being high priority. Notice that the client places her sons needs first, a safe home and a place at the local preschool; afterwards she will attend to her own needs for education and a career.

There is no standard process or checklist, best practice involves flexibility and individual work in guiding the client through the maze of plans and decisions she must make. The personal contacts teach the women how to look for apartments, what to ask at the viewing, and how to present herself as a good tenant. Further they help her make plans for her future, for example what education does she need, what type of job is she qualified for, does she need assistance in getting a prioritised place for her child in a local kindergarten? This part of the service is individually based on the women’s needs, assets and capabilities.

Finding an appropriate apartment is often a long and difficult process which takes up much more of the client’s energy then one would assume. Planning for their economic future and contact with social services if necessary is another part of this work. Some of the women we spoke with had defined plans for their future. Many wanted to continue their education, and all of them intended to work. The range of individual needs and circumstances were broad in the study, so future plans ranged from wanting to become more social, to wanting to attend a University in another European country. Both plans were appropriate for the women who made them.
Best practice in these situations has been expressed as helping the client identify her needs and encouraging her to believe she will overcome her challenges. The staff tries to create a nurturing environment in which the women can meet their own inborn needs to be safe, to love and belong, to be respected, and to achieve a sense of control (Saleebey 2006). Sometimes the participants spoke of being pushed by their contact person, but they considered it a necessary push to help them take control of their situation. As one woman expressed this, “I have to begin to think for myself, begin to make my own decisions.”

**Strengthening Networks and avoiding relapse:**
In many of the participants situations abuse led gradually to isolation. Both the abusers need for control over the family, and the woman’s shame of being abused often leads to weakening of ties to family and friends (Isdal 2000). One woman told us that she was forbidden contact with her own family;

> For the 7 years I have been married I have not been allowed to have contact with my mother or my sister. I haven't had contact with the rest of my family either.

After she moved away from her husband and into the shelter her family became her primary resource. They provided her with clothes, money, food, and a place to go when she wanted to get away from the shelter. Eventually she helped her mother become stronger and resist the press of her extended family to send the girl back to her husband. In the end she moved in with her mother and sister temporarily while waiting to move into her own apartment.

Some of the women who use the shelter are cut off from most of their original network, either because they have been isolated by the abuse, their family may be the abuser, or their family does not accept the women’s choice to leave and freezes her out (Berntsen 2005). In these situations the women need new opportunities to build a network. Best practice can be seen both as supporting contact with an existing network if that is appropriate, encouraging active contact with friends and family, negotiating with the existing family to clear up conflicts or helping the woman find opportunities to form a new network.
The women’s shelter can be an arena where a new network can be created and maintained after moving out of the shelter…women and children learn from each others creative problem solving and coping strategies to meet new challenges (Berntsen 2005: 34).

In 2009 the shelter began a network café which takes place once a week and gives earlier clients and current clients the opportunity to meet and join in an interesting activity. A good and reliable network can become a protective factor which helps the women avoid the next subject, relapse.

Once the woman has moved out of the shelter she enters a new period of uncertainty. Many of our participants discussed being lonely after moving out of the shelter. In the shelter the clients were in a protective environment and the fact that there was always someone available to talk to help them stay on track when they had doubts. However, when the woman moves out on her own she is vulnerable to returning to the former relationship. She may alternate between feelings of freedom in escaping her abusive situation, and feelings of loneliness. Sometimes even a dangerous situation can feel more comfortable than one which is unknown. When a previous partner is calling, apologizing, and swearing things will be different this time, it is not so easy to resist returning “home”. Some of our participants talked about missing their partners, and it must be understood that relationships are complex and few men are abusive all of the time.

Women of ethnic minority backgrounds can also experience pressure from their families to return to their husbands (Bernten 2005). She may have been raised with a different religious background and cultural norms then ethnic Norwegians. Divorce in many cultures is not acceptable and the entire family can lose face if a woman separates from her husband (Skogøy 2008). In some cases the entire ethnic community turns their backs to her, freezing her out of her earlier network.

One participant told us how important it was to have continued contact with the shelter. When she moved out on her own the pressure to return to her husband increased, and she seriously considered moving home;
When I moved out I received a lot of press from my family actually, that I ought to go back to him. If not for my own sake, I should do it for my son. And I thought about it quite a lot, going back to him. But after a couple times at the meetings (violence-self help) I really understood that it just wouldn’t work. It’s not an option. Sooner or later I will end up in the same situation again. It finally opened my eyes, it really did.

In this case the group provided the client with best practice, by helping her to understand that the violence was a pattern which was not likely to change. The network of other women in the same situation was equally helpful to her as her personal contact in this situation.

Practical help:
Much of the staff’s time and energy is used in helping their clients solve practical problems. The social system in Norway, while quite good, can be difficult to manoeuvre and slow to act. All of the women commented on practical help which they received, whether it was help in finding a lawyer, contacting the police, retrieving their belongings, getting their children safely back and forth to school or applying for economical help from the regional social office. One client describes the help she received as follows;

I needed help. How could I manage the situation by myself? I learned that my personal contact could go with me, but that I had to call the social office and explain and make an appointment. I had to call the social office; I had to talk to my lawyer. We called together, my personal contact and I, she called for me first and she introduced me to the lawyer

It is important for the women to know how they will get their basic needs met both at the shelter and in their new home. While for the sake of empowering the women they are encouraged to contact official offices themselves and make the needed appointments (Jonassen and Eidheim 2001). However the staff often finds they need to help the women make her case for the social office to secure financial resources. This can be helpful for Norwegian clients as well as minorities. As a first time user of the service it is not always easy to know how to present the situation to get proper help. The shelter staff has experience regarding which information is important for the social office in the decision making process.
Another arena where the shelter is active is making sure the needs of children staying there are met. It is not unusual for the shelter’s staff to help the women go the difficult step of asking child protective services for help. The centre used in this study had its own children’s team which followed up the children living there. This team was trained in identifying the needs of the children and in cooperating with children’s services to help the family get a good start. One woman told us;

“As long as my son’s ok, that is what is most important. I am very thankful for the help I had from children’s services through the whole situation. I have had a good relationship with the two caseworkers from children’s services. They have been here several times, had contact with my son, and helped with school and informed the teacher about what was happening. We have a good relationship with the school. And he is the same wonderful boy he always was, thank God!”

So in this case best practice is being flexible and understanding where to give help, and where to give encouragement. Sometimes the need to give help has more to do with the service provider than the client, but once a positive contact is established with official services the client is normally able to manage over her own case for the future (Jonassen and Eidheim 2001).

**Conclusion**

In this article I have presented the users viewpoint regarding what they rate as valuable help in their interaction with the women’s shelter. It was my intention to let the users identify best practice for us by sharing stories about help which gave them good results. Through the analysis process the findings have been divided into six categories to make the information easier to process and the responses more concrete.

The participants told us that changing the situation was important, and *stopping the violence* essential. In this section I have showed how the users considered best practice to be a feeling of safety by providing them with a secure place to stay while they are in crisis. The have also expressed appreciation for supportive staff who are readily available and help them calm down and recover from the initial trauma.

*Guidance and planning* was central to the user’s progress. Here they identified best practice as helping them sort out their problems, prioritise which should be approached first, and
motivating them to get working and helping them believe that they could tackle the situation even though they felt overwhelmed. Best practice also means balancing the need of the client for support with the need for self reliance. This implies having a good relationship with the client and using experience to guide when the person needs support and when they need a push.

Helping the clients to set up *appropriate and realistic goals* was also sited as important in many situations. Here the users stated that best practice involved being treated as an individual, that their personal contact invested time in them, showed flexibility in ideas and solutions, and saw the user’s untapped potential. Meeting the client where she is becomes essential in setting appropriate goals together with the individual, and taking her context into consideration.

*Strengthening networks* was also regarded as valuable to the participating users. Best practice in network building is seen as supporting contact with the existing network, where appropriate, and the opportunity to make new contacts through the shelter. This had significance for several users and helps to *avoid relapse* back to the abusive situation. One participant told us that continued contact with the centre and availability of a support group prevented her from returning to her husband. This is likely true for others who use the shelter and is to be considered to be valuable help in this case.

And finally all of the participants stated that *practical help* was important to them. Best practice in this category includes helping clients to solve practical problems such as securing economic support, receiving help from children’s services, or finding an experienced lawyer. In addition it includes providing information regarding rights and resources which empower the abused woman by helping her continue to receive support she needs to become independent and establish herself in the community.
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Discourses of survival: A study of the discourses domestic violence survivors reveal in talking about coping and reestablishment

Summary:

In this article, Discourses of survival: A study of the discourses domestic violence survivors reveal in talking about coping and reestablishment, the focus is placed on prevailing discourses identified in interviews with female domestic violence survivors.

The article is founded in a qualitative study of women who stayed at a local women’s shelter in the fall of 2008. Through discourse analysis of the interviews the article will lift up the users own voices as they share their experiences regarding receiving help from a local women’s shelter and re-establishing themselves in a home free from violence.

The results of the article identify four discourses which are present in all of the women’s interviews. These discourses are called 1) collective solutions discourse, 2) others-are-worse-off discourse, 3) violent experience discourse, and 4) Norwegian normative discourse. Through the use of Faucault’s definitions of discourse, power, and knowledge coupled with Butler’s theory of performative gender the article will show how these discourses both empower and challenge these survivors.
Introduction:

In the course of over 20 years, oppression and the physical maltreatment of women in the home have been recognized as an important problem and put on the agenda for change. Pressure from local and national groups have brought this social issue onto the international agenda (Dobash and Dobash 1992). Domestic violence is today internationally recognised as a serious criminal act and is proclaimed by the UN as a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the following article I would like to focus attention on the prevailing discourses in society which effect abused women, and which define both possibilities and limitations for their behaviour. Through the participant’s own statements I will highlight social discourses in Norway, and the west in general, which affect the women's possibilities for success and social acceptance in the reestablishment period after breaking with their abusive partner or family member. How do these women, facing so many challenges, overcome their obstacles and create a life free from violence? What role do social norms for gender and family life play in their choices during the change process?

In this article I will be presenting discourses which the participants in this study discussed in their interviews and how these affect their everyday lives. In the methods section of the article I will introduce you to the interview process and explain how the data was collected. Next I will present the theoretical basis of the article by giving a short summary of Faucault’s definitions and some of his theories regarding power, knowledge, and discourse. Further I will introduce the theory of Butler who argues that gender is not natural, but is constructed and performed according to societies norms for gendered behaviour. In the analysis section I will explain how I organised 10 hours of recorded conversations and categorised these so that they could be studied as a whole. I will then discuss the results of the study, and show how discourses affect the opportunities and choices these domestic violence survivors make. A short summary will then be given in the conclusion of the article.
Research Question:
How do gendered discourses expressed by domestic violence survivors affect their actions and opportunities during the reestablishment process after leaving the relationship?

Methods
The empirical data in this article is based on qualitative, semistructured interviews of five women who stayed at a Norwegian women’s shelter during the fall of 2008. These voluntary participants were interviewed shortly before moving out of the shelter and again about three months later. The women who were included in the study were first time residents of the women’s shelter, had all lived there for at least three weeks, and were in the process of moving out to their own apartment at the time of the first interview. The idea behind interviewing women at two different points in their process was to learn something about how the women coped after leaving the shelter, and how they viewed their stay in retrospect. This approach to the research is based on the assumption that battered women serve as experts on their own lives. This coincides with standpoint feminism, which supports privileging the experiences and voices of the women who participate in our projects over other available discourses (Kroløkke & Sørensen 2006).

The interview process was facilitated through my position as a part-time staff member at an emergency shelter for domestic violence survivors. After obtaining permission from the administrators of the shelter and concession from the Norwegian social sciences data services, I introduced the project to the shelters staff and conducted 10 confidential interviews. With each participant’s permission, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews were conducted at the discretion of the women in private rooms, and lasted an average of one hour.

An interview guide was used in order to create a structured conversation about the women's experiences during and after their stay. All of the questions were intentionally open ended and semistructured so as to provide the women with opportunities to shape the flow and content of their contributions (Kvale 1997). Due to the sensitive nature of the information shared all efforts have been made to disguise the women’s identities, including changing of names, places and nationalities. All recordings have been magnetically erased. The interviews were performed in Norwegian and have been translated into English for inclusion in this article.
While the translations are as precise as possible, some expressions have been changed to keep the meaning of the quote intact in a different language.

Only women who were breaking away from their abuser were included in this study. Although it would have been desirable to include women who chose to return to their family home, this would be difficult to complete for practical and ethical reasons. One primary reason we chose not to pursue this kind of situation was fear of possible risk for the participant. It is also important to mention that this study only shows the situation from the women’s point of view. Violence does not occur in a vacuum and we cannot disregard the fact that the men who are described in the study may have a different of the same situation.

**What is domestic violence?**
Domestic violence is defined in this article as any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse be it physical, psychological, sexual, financial or emotional, which occurs between two adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members (Dobash & Dobash 1998). Within this definition the gender of the victim and the perpetrator is not defined, however in this study it is primarily men’s violence against women which is in focus. While it is true that some women are violent against their male partners, Pape’s study of 2003 shows that repeated battering and systematic abuse is almost exclusively perpetrated by men against female victims.

Domestic violence is typically associated with physical abuse (NOU 2003:31). This understanding of domestic violence can further contribute to the invisibility and taboo nature of abuse. Domestic violence is more than the individual episode, in the majority of cases violence is continual instead of episodic, and the effect is an accumulated effect over time (Hammerlin 2002). Fear of new violence plays a major role in the control aspect of such abuse. The psychological effect and repeated nature of abuse explains the damage which it can cause to the victim’s quality of life (Stark 2007).

**Scope of domestic violence in Norway**
There are challenges in measuring the scope of domestic violence in Norway. Up until recently the police’s registration system did not separate domestic violence from other types. Using the police’s statistics one can only divide the victims according to gender and attempt
to estimate the number which are a result of domestic violence. In addition the police’s statistics only represent the cases which were not withdrawn. Due to the familial nature of domestic violence a significant number of cases which are originally reported to the police are withdrawn by the women who later decide not to press charges (Politidirektoratet. 2002). While women’s shelters, have a long history of registering clients which contact them, and can provide a wealth of information regarding who uses the centre (Hirsch & Nørgaard 2007) these statistics only represent the women who have sought help through the shelter, which is often a last result for abused women.

Arguably the best statistic available, and the one which I will use, is the quality of life study performed by Statistics Norway (2007). This study shows that approximately 10,000 responded that they had experienced violence from a current or previous partner or family member in the last year, and of these 3,000 reported physical injuries which required treatment. The weakness with this report is that it is based on self reporting methods which can effect the precision for both over and under reporting.

The gendered nature of domestic violence
The Justice and police department’s committee considered it important to apply a gender perspective to their study of domestic violence (NOU 2003:31). Men’s violence against women is exercised within a hierarchical power structure in which men have a superior place over women (ibid). This social order contributes to the possibility for some men to establish and maintain a dominant position over the women they live with. Through the use of different forms of coercive power, such as emotional manipulation, jealousy, fits of anger, and isolation, some men eventually gain systematic and complete control over their partners life (Råkil 2002).

Attitudes in society still tend to hold the victim responsible for the violence (NOU 2003:31), this is shown through attitudes such as “Why doesn’t she just leave?”; “This woman has been here a dozen times, but she always goes back”. Blaming the victim instead of placing the blame on the perpetrator is a symptom of a gendered discourse on violence in society (Jenkins and Davidson 1999). Such attitudes fail to understand the complex nature of domestic violence such as the extensive social and psychological damage which an abusive relationship inflicts (ibid). The barriers for leaving an abusive relationship can include among others, the
control the man has over the woman’s actions and contacts, isolation, the combination of violence-love and promises of change, deterioration of self confidence in the abused woman, the threat of poverty, fear that the violence will escalate, or fear of being expelled from the country in the case of immigrant women (Croghan and Mielle 1998).

In addition Croughan and Mielle (1998) point out women often bear the responsibility for the quality of family relationships. They are therefore also seen as having responsibility for preventing conflicts, and feel guilt or shame when they are not able to make a relationship work. It must be understood that gendered discourses are also a part of the victim’s view of the world. Some women take an active part in their own submission, through the integration of cultural norms. This is an example of what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as symbolic violence which causes those in society who are dominated to comply with the dominant cultures ideals, normally without being aware that they are doing so.

_Cultural gendered discourses_

The meeting of diverse cultures in the Norwegian society is another area which is affected by popular modern discourse. The family model within some minority groups may appear contradictory to the attitudes and values which are expressed in the Norwegian equal opportunity legislation (Jacobsen 2002). Society recognises these differences through such media coverage of issues such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages and honour killings. It is important to emphasise that this is an us-and-them discourse which continues to excuse violence. According to Jacobsen’s research (2002) these traditions are not primarily expressions of Islam’s theology and ethics. These practices are representative of social practices in limited geographical societies and not representative of the immigrant population as a whole, which is quite diverse, or Islam in general.

_Theoretical basis: Foucault meets Butler, an exciting combination_

_Foucault's concepts: Discourse and power_

Discourses are defined as ways of constructing the accepted forms for knowledge which are considered so natural in a given culture that they are eventually taken for granted and regarded as “truth”. We create our social and cultural practices, even our social and cultural selves of such so called knowledge and truths. According to Foucault it is through discourse,
or everything we accept as legitimate knowledge, which we are created (Foucault 1999). We create our social universe, our selves, and all acceptable and unacceptable behaviour through language. In order to talk about feminism for example, one must have an understanding of what feminism is, and the opposite, what feminism is not. You need theories or a common understanding of what feminism entails. In addition, we need terms that allow us to talk about it, and even if it should be a liberating discourse, there are still rules. There are certain things you can say, and can not say from a feminist viewpoint.

Foucault uses the term genealogy (Foucault 1977) to describe a sort of archaeology into the historical development of different discourses and exploration of which discourses have dominated subjects through different periods of time. The traditional ideas which are taken for granted in science, literature, religion, and law are gradually built up to become a part of our modern concept of reality and truth. Gender is an excellent example of this. Everything we have learned from the first day of our life about being a boy or girl, man or woman, is a discourse which lies deep in the accumulated knowledge that we have accepted as truth.

Since no single discourse exists alone, but is always in competition with other discourses (Baxter 2003), the participants we spoke with live not in one single discourse but within many competing discourses. These discourses create the societal rules, and play a major role in how the women handle challenges in their daily lives. According to Foucault morals and values are also created through discourse. Every age has a dominant group of discursive elements that people unconsciously live within (Foucault 1999) and forms their concepts of right and wrong and their prevalent values. Today's prevailing discourse, which won dominance over time, will eventually control ideas about what is normal or appropriate behaviour; while other competing discourses will eventually be marginalized. This is the key to discourse's power to define knowledge and the accepted sources of knowledge in any given society. Power and knowledge are always inextricably connected (Foucault 1995). The producers of knowledge are at the same time affecting the balance of power, usually in their own favour.

Power acts like a fishnet which, according to Foucault, binds together human organizations, beliefs, relationships, and subjective identity. Power is not necessarily negative or positive, but something that affects the energy of all social relations. It exists in every relationship, and is exercised constantly. If you can imagine Einstein’s concept of energy which can not be
created or destroyed, but only transferred from one source to another; such is power for Foucault (ibid).

**Judith Butler: Performativity**

Judith Butler is a renowned feminist philosopher who has been partly inspired by Foucault (Lorentzen 2006) and her theories have dominated the debates on Gender for almost 20 years. She is particularly known for her *theory of performativity* and her contribution to the development of queer theory (ibid). For Butler (1999) the focus of her work is the concept that gender is performative. One is neither male nor female, but one learns to exercise one's assigned gender from society. Thus masculine and feminine are contextual in time and place.

As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) said, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." Butler’s theory on gender argues that gender identity is discursive and in itself has no independent essence. *I am not a woman, it is how I physically, behaviourally, and discursively present myself and repeat the norms for female or male behaviour* (Lorentzen, 2006) which makes me a woman. To put it in a different way, gender is something that we *do*, not something we *are* or own. This is not to say that we choose our gender freely (Butler, 1999). Being perceived as a male or female begins at birth, when we lack the language or understanding to choose or question our gender.

Butler’s argument is that we repeat social norms, and by obeying these norms, we confirm and reinforce discourses on gender. If one does not repeat them, but misinterpret or directly act against the norms we are seen by society oppositional or non-conformists. In this case we are either sanctioned, or others learn that there are different ways of “doing” gender besides the dominant normalized discourse (Butler 1999). This is how discourses change and develop into new directions over time.

**Performing gender**

Toril Moi believes that we must take the female body and its experiences in the world seriously. She is opposed to any definition of femininity or masculinity (Moi in Midttun 2008). Once people begin to define what femininity is, then it is a quick jump from the discourse we created to creating a norm. However, there will always be women who do not fit into the norm, and these will not defined as *normal* women (ibid). The norms for feminine
behaviour in Norway can be seen represented in the publicly accepted behaviours, on TV, in the media, and even in juridical regulations regarding gender equality, marriage, divorce and immigration. Through the interview participants I wish to get a glimpse of how they experience performing their gender in the Norwegian society. Two of the informants in the study are Norwegian, while the other three are from other countries and have immigrated to Norway. How do these women do gender within the context they live in?

Using Butler’s theory (1999) of gender as performative, I will show how the participants “do” gender by following western norms regarding expected female behaviour. Using gender as an analytical lens, it will be interesting to see how each participant copes with the aftermath of domestic violence as a woman. Special focus will be placed on the discourses of equality, and how these can be both liberating and challenging for the modern woman.

One advantage of looking at gender as performative is that it is a developing feature of social interaction. When discussing what individuals “do with” discourses, we can also show how discourses can be empowering for our participants. Using this view we can show how it is possible for the participants to try on different discourses and test them out (Sunderland 2004). A discourse is not stable or completely developed once and for all, but is an ever changing and developing concept. In several cases the interview participants are entering into a new life situation and in a process which changes their personal identity. The view that they are an active participant who may choose to try out various discourses in the change process builds on a view of knowledge which emphasises that discourses are not only dominating, but they can also be empowering.

Analysis
FPDA as an analytical tool

The discourse analysis method chosen is based on Judith Baxter’s (2003) feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis, or FPDA, which is defined as a feminist method to analyze the way people negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in life through conversation. The theory also places the speaker in competing discourses and highlights how the speaker does not only position herself in relation to one discourse, but positions herself in relation to many competing discourses at any one time (ibid). After experiencing such a personal crisis, as the participants of this study have done, the individual will often be in the
process of changing their self-perception and reshaping their relationships. Therefore this method which views competing discourses within the same context seemed appropriate to the theme. FPDA is closely related to Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis (Sunderland 2004), to modern forms of discourse analysis which are adapted for use in conversation analysis.

Although at first it may seem that there is a conflict between feminism, which takes a standpoint to promote women's position in society, and post-structuralisms focus on language as a creative phenomenon, Baxter (2003) considers this a productive contradiction which highlights different sides to a complex reality, while keeping in the spirit of Butler and her concept of gender as performed. In addition to the obvious benefit that the approach has a focus on feminism, I selected the method because it is designed to analyze the discourses at a micro-sociological level, such as in everyday conversations.

**Spotting discourses in the narratives**

In pursuit of the current discourses in the participants' narratives, I have compared the interviews with each other, and before and after moving out of the shelter. The goal was to identify the discourses which are disclosed through the interview process and see how these discourses affect the women’s choices.

To identify the active discourses it was helpful to ask the following questions to the transcribed text:

- Which words, expressions or messages repeat themselves in the conversation?
- Which themes or topics were common in all the interviews?
- What links and associations were seen in what the participants shared with us?
- What conflicts were visible in the participants' narratives?

To find the discourses within the texts I read the interviews one by one, and noted ideas that seemed important, contradictory, or were repeated within the interview. In the next step of analysis I compared the interviews with each other looking especially for repeating patterns of words, ideas or concepts. By systematically studying and deconstructing the texts I have identified key discourses that could have an impact on women's decision making. The data was then cross referenced with the other participant’s responses and the time of the interview.
Four key discourses in the empirical data

While it is possible to find many discourses present in the conversations, I had to limit myself to a few central discourses due to the scope of this article. I have thus identified four discourses which I would like to focus upon:

1. Collective solutions discourse - This discourse is based on a recurring theme in the empirical data. Participants told us that they saw it as important to have contact with others who were in a similar situation and share experiences. Solving problems collectively through group discussions and sharing of ideas was a common denominator. Here one participant tells how she learned from the other women how to find an apartment where she wished to live:

   I got a lot of advice from other residents here. I learned that I could put an ad in the paper myself (to help find an apartment), so I submitted an ad in Spydeberg because I wanted to live there. Because of the ad the apartment owner called me, instead of me having to call everywhere.

2. Others-are-worse-off discourse - Without an exception this statement came up. It seems the participants found strength by viewing their own situation as better than the worst case scenario. No matter how serious the violence was in their own, the participants considered the other’s situation as worse. Maybe this can be seen as a healthy reaction, to lift their own experience up in their own view by regarding the other’s situation as worse:

   I have talked with some of the other girls that live here, and many have been through worse things than I have. Knowing that has helped me a bit.

3. Violent experience discourse – One interesting discovery in the interview process was the apparent need of all of the participants to talk about their abuse. Although there were no questions regarding the violent experience in our interview guide the topic came up spontaneously in every interview. Upon changing the subject and trying to get the interview back “on track” the women returned to the violent experience in every case. It is possible that the participants didn’t understand the intentions of our study, which was to highlight the coping strategies of the participants and learn more about which services were most helpful to them. However, I can’t overlook the possibility that the context also played a role.


It is so frustrating not having any power. That man can not be here because he exploits women! One needs only to look at the money! It is clear; they just need to look at my bank account! Check out what he did to my car! I never would have believed it! And then he comes home to me and says, "You do everything wrong, and you are not the woman I want." He was out with other women, and I can’t understand this, because he was here (in the country) for family reunification with me! I had to support him, and he abused me, and now I have no right to say that I don’t want him here! He is a dangerous person. - Angelina, shares her experience.

4. Norwegian normative discourse - This discourse is repeated almost word for word any time I took up the theme of plans for the future. The media, politicians, and judicial law in Norway place emphasis on equal opportunities in education and working life for men and women. The norm for Norwegian women is that they are expected by society to complete an education and be an active participant in the work force (regjeringen.no 2009). As one woman described her plans:

   First, I must find us a home, and get out of here. It is frightening, but it must be done. At first I didn’t want to be here, but now I don’t want to leave. But yes, I need to find housing, get my son into the kindergarten again, and find me a job ...

These four discourses were prevalent in all the texts, and were represented both in the early interview and the follow up. While some of them came in response to specific themes, and may represent the prevalent discourse of the larger societies for those themes, others came up spontaneously at different points in the interview process. How may these discourses affect the participant’s actions in the reestablishment process?

Discussion:

Discourses which empower
The four discourses that I have presented in the analysis have both negative and positive consequences for the participants. I will now demonstrate how these discourses can also empower women and then go on to present some of the challenges which they may also create.

The collective solutions discourse offers many benefits for women. There are several advantages of performing their gender with the use of this discourse. This provides a mirror effect; they have the chance to see their own situation reflected in the others and receive correction when they misunderstand. Similar experiences and others responses to their shared stories or challenges may provide a useful correction for all involved. Moreover, I will point
out that solving problems together contributes the opportunity to learn from the others' positive and negative experiences, and provide broader perspective over the situation. One can also benefit from others solutions which one had never thought of alone. Simply put, several heads are better than one.

The *others-are-worse-off discourse* may contribute to women exposed to violence getting back on their feet and may help the woman stop feeling sorry for themselves. This is useful in relation to resilience and empowerment. The experience that others also have difficulties may make one's own pain more bearable. Again, this produces a mirror effect which may contribute to empowerment through the ability to see clearly that others are also under pressure and still they go on. If the woman experiences that it is not her friend’s fault that her husband was violent, then perhaps it’s not her own fault that her partner was abusive either (Råkil 2002). This can help the woman to place the responsibility for the abuse where it belongs, at the hands of the abuser.

*Violent experience discourse* encourages the woman to talk with others about her experience. Talking about what has happened to her can help to free her from the trauma and liberate her from the situation. If as Foucault suggests discourse creates reality, then changing how you view your reality by changing what you say about it can be an empowering process. Giving words to the violence also makes it visible to others, both privately and publicly. This further challenges the invisibility of domestic violence and breaks its taboo-ridden character. The woman then becomes empowered by the fact that she violates the norm and speaks out about her experience.

*What is a normal life?*
Foucault focuses on the question of how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems, which have received the status of truth, and how these define, dominate and organize our concepts of ourselves and the social world. At the same time other alternative discourses compete, and are either marginalized or put the original discourse under pressure (Foucault, 1999). It is the “taken-for-granted”, acceptance of the stereotype, or the public expectation for these women which reveals what the dominant discourse represents. The women in the survey quote the *Norwegian-normative discourse*’s social norms quite clearly in their statements: find work, be independent, be strong, put the children's needs first, and achieve an acceptable
standard of living. Syltevik & Wærness (2004; 122) express the gap between these expectations and the women’s realities in this way:

The single mother’s situation shows clearly many of the basic problems women meet in the workforce, the family and the welfare state. Even with full time employment and transitional support from the state a women in the female dominated work sector will have a tough time making ends meet.

The participants in our study were young and had been living under an unequal resource distribution. Now as separated or divorced women their economic situation has been further reduced. Several of the women reported loosing money and assets during the previous relationship. Having newly ended an unequal relationship with someone who exhibits domineering behaviour, combined with their reduced economic status, makes the normal goals for Norwegian women an even greater challenge. While the women must eventually adjust and provide for themselves, this is a process. In the beginning there is a real gap between society’s expectations and the concrete possibilities of success which they are faced with.

For many of these women it will also present a challenge to give their child’s needs priority while they find housing, start working and become independent. It would seem logical that women of a higher socioeconomic status would have a greater chance of being successful then women of lower socioeconomic status. However, the dominant discourse appears to apply to both. On the other hand these women are now living on their own, and they have little choice but to aim for societies expectations. The question is how society can help them to succeed?

Using Butler’s theory we can point out that some of these women are prevented from performing their gender in the socially expected way due to lack of social capital such as contacts, work experience, and education. The social discourses are not adjusted for different segments in society. Social policy and idealised images of strong, independent working women become incorporated into the participant’s identities. However some are not able to meet these ideals in society. Without realising that there are real obstacles to their success this may result in symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991) and affect their self esteem.

*Gender equality; a demanding standard*

On the television, in newspapers and in legislation gender equality is represented as a benefit
and a goal for the entire population. In the mandatory introductory language courses for immigrants the women are told that there is gender equality in Norway. As a political goal equality has contributed to Norway’s recent ranking as number one on the international gender gap index according to the World Economic Forum (Holter, Svare, & Egeland 2008).

While this is a discourse feminists are grateful for, and which contributes to better conditions for women, it is also a demanding standard. Some of the participants in the study come from cultures where the western work ethic for women is in direct conflict with the norms which define appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in their homeland (Skogøy 2008). In addition several participants in the survey have been deprived of the opportunity to finish their education because of pressures to marry, and most of the women have lone responsibility for young children. Still the women show through their future plans that they understand that their situation has changed and accept responsibility for themselves, their own economy and their children’s wellbeing.

As a strategy for survival, some women who are victims of abuse assume a subordinate position to their abuser in an attempt to avoid new violence. This must be understood in the context of a partner relationship which originally began as a loving relationship which gradually changed. Often, the violent partner is not directly repressive in the beginning; the change is gradual, through small occurrences and increases over time:

*The relationship that we had didn’t start with physical violence. It started with everything else, like controlling behaviour and jealousy. I see myself as a rather strong person, so it’s a good thing that I got out of this early. There is also a lot invested in such a relationship, you have invested time and money. We had just bought a house together. So you kind of wonder how bad it can get.*

Over time the woman loses her influence, and the man gains greater power and control in the relationship (Råkil 2002). When women have integrated society's norms about gender equality into their belief systems, but are denied the opportunity to be equal in the relationship it contributes to feelings of guilt and shame. This process leaves the woman dealing with the emotional and psychological consequences of long term abuse which can further impair their ability to achieve many of their goals, as one participant states here.

*It is difficult. It’s still present in my thoughts, it’s still controlling me. I don’t know, I guess I need time...it goes very deep. I haven’t managed well; I still don’t have a job.*
Work, my education, I can’t think about it now. It is difficult for me to be in Oslo. I have anxiety over possibly meeting him in the street. I try to be social, but I can’t manage to do much. I wish I could get out more, but I just can’t. I hope this will get better. I want to be strong.

Pay particular attention to how she states that she has not coped well enough because she is not working, and expresses the norms of getting out, being social and being strong as important. Here again we see the effects of symbolic violence. Many victims of domestic violence have difficulty breaking into the workforce due to after effects of the violence. At the same time they are sanctioned for staying at home by the experience that society around them does not give recognition to women who remain outside the workforce (Lotherington 2008). Victims of domestic violence who are disabled by their traumatic experience suffer from an invisible disability which stigmatises them further in social interaction.

Cultural contexts require individual solutions

Farida went to high school in Norway, but quit the last year due to family pressure to marry. In some cultures the family chooses the future husband for their daughters, and if the daughter doesn’t wish to marry the chosen man emotional and psychological press, physical force, or violence may be used to obtain her agreement (Skogøy 2008). In this case she was pressed into marrying a relative and the couple shared a home with her in-laws. After a time she began being abused by both her husband and his parents. When she later escaped to the shelter she didn’t have time to grab any personal possessions. Afterwards her husband argued that since he had bought her clothes and personal belongings, he owned them.

He refused to give me my belongings, just a few of my clothes, my bed and my son’s bed. That was all. Anything I bought while we were married, he refused to give me. It was paid for with his money, he says. I have no rights to them. He wants to take revenge; he threw me out of the house, refused to give me anything, not even my son’s things, his toys. I had a safety deposit box with gold jewellery which I received from my mother, wedding gifts, and such... gold for my son ... he emptied it. Neither the lawyer nor the police can help me.

Here Farida is not treated as an equal to her husband by him or by the law. She is still performing her gender in the traditional way, but the rules have changed. Having grown up in the west, she has been brought up with two ways of performing gender. When she lived in the traditional home with her in-laws their traditional gender rules applied to her even though she lived in Norway. When she left her husband she now begins performing her gender according to the western norms, however she doesn’t have an equal starting point with the Norwegian
women. Her traditional role robbed her of education and work experience. She must now reposition herself in the gendered discourse as a divorced mother and as an independent woman.

**Concluding remarks:**
The goal of this article has been to highlight everyday discourses which are presented by women who are re-establishing themselves after an abusive relationship. I have used quotes from the participants to bring four selected discourses to light and to show how they affect the women’s change process. The interview participants are unique individuals and their backgrounds and history is diverse, however they all have one common experience; being exposed to violence in such a degree that they found it necessary to leave their homes.

By using Foucault’s understanding of discourse, and Butlers understanding of gender as performative the article has shown how the above mentioned discourses both challenge and empower the studies participants. As a feminist I found it difficult to criticize the equality discourse, however, it was difficult not to see that some of the women in the study in fact had difficulties in relation it. It is not the concept of equality which is a problem, but the ideal that men and women should be treated equally and act accordingly which does not always function in practice. Something which they wished to comply with, but lacked the resources to do so.

The article has presented the four discourses which were identified as common for the participants which I will briefly review.

The *collective solutions discourse* showed how these women discuss and solve their problems in a collective manner. The women expressed that discussing their situation with others provided them with support and new solutions which they found useful.

The *others are worse off* discourse showed how these women compared themselves to others in similar situations and placed themselves and their actions in a more positive light. This may help abused women rebuild their self confidence as they look at their situation and see themselves as survivors and their actions as effective.
The *violent experience discourse* showed how the participants appeared to have a need to retell their stories. This discourse can also be a benefit to them as Foucault expresses, our realities are made up of our discourses. In repeating their story they may gradually reframe their experience placing a greater focus on what they did to survive, how this actions was unfair and unreasonable, and placing themselves in the story as one who overcame their challenges and survived in the end.

The *Norwegian-normative discourse* has shown that the women, whether Norwegians or emigrant, understand their gender role in the larger society. The women quote the discursive expectations for women in a similar way, which highlights how prevalent these norms for behaviour are. Some of them may have a cultural conflict with these roles, but all appear to have a desire to fit the norms and become what society considers as successful.

As an outsider I raise the concern that not all of the women in this study may have an equal opportunity to be “successful” as they come from different backgrounds, are raised with different discursive roles and values, and may not have the material resources to succeed. The question this study should now raise is how we can help them get off to a good start. Which steps as social workers and as a society can we take to even up the odds for success?

I encourage those who read this article to participate in creating new discourses which will make it clear that domestic violence in Norway is totally unacceptable.
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Appendix

Attachment 1. Interview guide:

Intervjuer: Når volden tar slutt:

1. Intervjuer
Generelle spørsmål:

- Hvordan fikk du kjennskap til hvilken hjelp krisecenteret tilbyr?
- Hvor lang tid har du bodd på OK?
- Hvilken hjelp får du?
- Får du krisesamtaler, råd og veiledning?
- Hvordan vurderer du den hjelpen du har fått?
- Hva vil du vurdere som mest hjelpsomt?
- Får krisecenteransatte hjelpe deg til å komme i kontakt med offentlige hjelpemidler?
- Hvilken hjelp får du i forhold til disse?
- Hvordan opplever du oppholdet, blir du styrket, er dette nyttig for deg? På hvilken måte?
- Opplever du at krisecenterets ansatte får lettere kontakt med offentlige instanser enn deg selv?
- Fører du deg trygg på OK?
- (Har du barn med på OK? Hvordan er forholdene for barn på krisecenteret?
- Hvilke planer har du for livet ditt videre?

Styrking av nettverket som et ledd videre:

- Får du kontakt med andre beboere? Hvis ja skal dere fortsatt ha kontakt etter du flytter?
- Har du familie som bor i nærheten av deg, eller bor de i utlandet?
- Har du kontakt med dem og hvor ofte?
- Hvilke emner snaker du sammen med familien om og hvilke ikke?
- Hvis du ikke har kontakt med familien – hvorfor?
- Fører du at du kan få hjelp av din familie? Hvilken type hjelp?
- Fører du at du kan få hjelp av dine venner og bekjente? Hvilken?
- Er du i arbeid? Er du under utdanning, språkkurs eller kvalifiseringstiltak?
- Får du samtaler eller annet type støtte fra andre offentlige instanser? Hvis ikke føler du at du har behov for det?

Åpne spørsmål

- Er det noe du har lyst til å fortelle som vi ikke har spurt deg om?

2. Intervjuer etter oppholdet:

Økonomiske og Bosituasjon:

- Hva gjør du nå for tiden? Er du i full jobb?
- Skole?
- Sykefravær?
- Sosialhjelp?
- Trygd?
Hvor har du bodd siden det siste oppholdet?
Hvis du dro hjem til ektefelle/samboer, hvorfor valgte du denne løsningen?
Hvis du bor i egen bolig nå, hvordan fikk du takk i den? Hvilke utfordringer møt du da du var på jakt etter bolig? Fikk du hjelp av noen?

Nettverk:
Har du fortsatt kontakt med personen som er grunnen til at du kom til Oslo krisecenter?
Hvordan fungerer forholdet nå? Har noe endret seg? Har dere fått hjelp fra andre instanser?
Fikk du kurs eller arbeidstrening etter oppholdet på OK?
(Fikk du barnehageplass eller skole til barna?)
(Hvordan synes du at dine barn opplevde bruddet mellom deg og partneren din?)

Hvilken? Hvordan føler du at dette fungerer?
Når du trenger noen å snakke med, hvem tar du kontakt med?
Opplever du at du får støtt fra familien? Venner?
Hva kan dere snakke om? Er det noe du vil helst ikke snakke med familien eller venner om?
Hva tror du dine venner og familien din synes om din nåværende situasjon?

Nyttig hjelp:
Hvis du tenker deg tilbake til den første tiden på OK og nå, hvordan har ditt situasjon endret seg?
Hvilke hjelpebehov opplevde du at du hadde?
Kan du huske noen enkelte hendelser som du synes var spesielt utfordrende ifht din situasjon da?
Kan du huske hva du ble rådet til i forbindelse med disse hendelsene?
Hvordan takler du slik situasjoner i dag? Hva har endret seg?
Hvilke konkret hjelp fikk du fra OK?

Hjelp til anmelde?
Kontakt m sosialkontor?
Kontakt med lege
Advokat
Samtaler
Hjelp med bolig
Oppfølging fra dagsenter? Hvorfor eller hvorfor ikke?

Var det noe du skulle ønske de var mer opptatt av/lærte mer om?
Om du tenker på de kravene som var stilt deg ifht å finne bolig, opplever du disse krav som rimelig?
Om det var stilt noen krav til deg fra sosialkontor, opplever disse som rimelig? Hvordan ville du vurdere hjelp du fikk fra de offentlige? Forstår de utfordringer kvinner i din situasjon står ovenfor?

Hvordan opplever du at hverdagslivet ditt er nå?
Hvilken betydning har oppholdet haft for din nåværende situasjon?
Følte du deg trygg for mishandleren mens du bodde på krisecenteret? Hadde du behov for voldalarm?
Hatte du behov for krise eller planlagt samtaler etter utflytting?
Hadde du behov å ringe krisetelefonen?

Var det annen hjelp som du opplevde du trengte som du ikke fikk?
Har du vært på krisecenter for oppfølgelse eller møter?
Har du benyttet krisesenteret på andre måter etter oppholdet? Hvordan?
Hva tenker du at du kunne ha lært mer av mens du bodde på OK?
Er det noe du kunne ønske var bedre?
Opplevde du deg bedre rustet til å bo alene etter et opphold?

Mestring:
Hvilke planer hadde du for livet ditt videre da du flyttet ut fra krisesenteret?
 Hvordan gikk det? Måtte du endre dem underveis?
Hva var lettere eller vanskeligere enn forventet?
Krisbearbeiding – hva får du ut av det? Hvilke følelsesmessige strategier har du for å takle hverdagslivet?
Selvhjulpenhet – hva vil det si å være selvhjulpen? Betyr det for deg å kunne klare praktiske utfordringer selv eller er det også å kunne vite hvordan søke hjelp?
Hvilke nye kunnskaper har du fått etter oppbruddet/ oppholdet på OK?
Opplever du at du har forandret deg når det gjelder ditt selvbilde, handlingsmåte og tanker?
På hvilken måte? Har du fått positive eller negative erfaringer?
Når er krisen over – blir den noen gang over? Når kan du erkjenne at den er over?
Hvilke strategier bruker du mot livets påkjenninger?

Åpne spørsmål

Nå har vi kommet til slutten av intervjuet. Er det noe du har lyst til å tilføye, noe du har lyst til å si tilslutt? Er det noe du vil jeg skal spørre om som jeg ikke har spurt om?
Samtykke til å delta i undersøkelse
Vi er to mastergradstudenter i sosialt arbeid ved Høgskolen i Oslo.
Etter selv å ha arbeidet med kvinner utsatte for vold i nære relasjoner ved et opphold på Oslo Krisesenter, springer vårt valg av undersøkelse ut fra en interesse for hvordan kvinnene får det når de drar videre etter oppholdet.

Vårt ønske er å få frem hvordan kvinner mestrer hverdagen ved og etter opphold på krisesenteret og hva de selv opplever som nyttig hjelp på Oslo Krisesenter. I denne forbindelse vil vi gjerne intervjue deg.

Intervjuene skal foregå på to tidspunkter. Det første er mens du bor på krisesenteret og det andre er to til tre måneder etter utflytting. Intervjuene vil bli tatt opp på bånd. Bånd og skriftlig materiale er underlagt taushetsplikt og vil bli behandlet konfidensielt.

Opplysningene som fremkommer blir behandlet i tråd med personopplysningsloven.
Alle personopplysninger og materiale vil bli makulert ved undersøkelsens ferdigstillelse 01.05.09.

Det er frivillig å delta i undersøkelsen. Om du gir ditt samtykke til å delta er det likevel mulig å trekke seg når som helst uten å måtte oppgi noen grunn. Det vil ikke få noen konsekvenser for forholdet til krisesenteret dersom du velger å si nei til deltakelse eller senere velger å trekke deg. Undersøkelsen er meldt til Personvernombudet ved Norsk vitenskapelig datatjeneste.

Vennlig hilsen

Diane Amundsen og Pepa Panov

Fagligeveileder: Nicole Hennum, Høyskolen i Oslo  tlf.

Samtykkeerklæring
Ut fra overforstående informasjon gis det samtykke til å bli intervjuet i forbindelse med undersøkelsen om kvinners opplevelser på og etter opphold på Oslo Krisesenter.

Dato: Underskrift