



UCD SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE

*WORKING PAPER SERIES
2010*

**Violence and Voice: Using a Feminist Constructivist Grounded
Theory to Explore Women's Resistance to Abuse**

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WP 17

September 2010

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
BELFIELD DUBLIN 4**

Violence and Voice: Using a Feminist Constructivist Grounded Theory to Explore Women's Resistance to Abuse

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FOR PUBLICATION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JANUARY 2011

Abstract:

This paper describes the rationale for the choice of constructivist grounded theory methodology in a research project which explored women's responses to intimate partner violence. In view of the very sensitive subject matter of the study, and the long standing and predominant influence of feminist theory in understanding both the causality and dynamics of such violence, a methodology was sought which reflected feminist approaches to research. The paper explores the debates regarding the existence or even the possibility of a 'feminist methodology'. In concluding that there is no *specific* feminist methodology, the paper outlines the rationale for the choice of episodic narrative interviews and constructivist grounded theory as methodologies which uphold the goals and values of feminist research. The application of constructivist grounded theory in the analysis of the data and its suitability in the development of a theoretical analysis of women's responses to intimate partner violence is presented and discussed.

Key Words: Constructivist Grounded Theory: Domestic Violence: Feminist Research; Intimate partner violence.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to their edited Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005:2) refer to the relationship between colonialism and ethnographic research. Qualitative research was seen to be allied to the colonial enterprise as it tried to understand the 'exotic other', a 'primitive, non white person from a foreign

culture'. At the risk of overextending the metaphor, it could be argued that much research into women's experiences of intimate partner violence is also an attempt to understand 'the other'. The other in this case is a woman who experiences a range of abusive experiences from an intimate partner and to the amazement of some (and the chagrin of others) does not leave the relationship as soon as social agencies and other professionals think she should (Peled et al., 2000). Research however suggests that most abused women do leave violent partners (Watson and Parsons, 2005) but the process of these separations and the individual and social beliefs that influence their timing have not been closely analysed and consequently are not well understood.

This paper describes the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory as the methodological tool in a study which explored the manner in which severely abused women negotiated their individual journeys to safety. The paper will firstly outline the rationale behind the choices made in designing the study's methodology in view of the diverse variety of methods available to the contemporary social researcher (Sarantakos, 2005: 10), the sensitivity of the topic as well as the emphasis on a feminist analysis of intimate partner violence in contemporary literature (Stark, 2007; Wood, 2001; Dobash and Dobash, 1992, 1998). It will briefly summarize contemporary developments in constructivist grounded theory approach and will then discuss the analysis of the data gathered in the episodic narrative interviews. Based on this analysis, a theoretical approach to understanding abused women's journeys to safety was developed, an approach which moves from data and method through narrative reflections, to the development of empowering strategies to support abused women.

IS THERE A FEMINIST METHODOLOGY ?

In view of the importance of the contribution of both feminist theory and feminist activism (Schechter, 1982) in the development of public concern and services for abused women, a study which set out to explore women's responses to abuse must firstly clarify whether feminist theorizing can assist in the development of an appropriate research methodology. It must therefore firstly answer the question- is there a feminist methodology?

It is something of an understatement to suggest that there are ‘diverse views’ (Letherby, 2003:16) in response to this question, and there is clearly no consensus in the literature on whether there is, or even should be, a ‘specifically feminist approach to doing social research’ (Maynard, 1998:127). While there may be consensus that feminist research in its many variations places women’s diverse experiences, and the social institutions that frame those experiences, centre stage (Olesen, 2000:216), debate centres not just on the methods used by feminist researchers, but on the aims of the research itself, the power relationships between researchers and the “researched”, accountability and the potential of the research to create change for women (Olesen, 2005, 2000, Mason 1997, Kelly et al, 1994, Maynard, 1994,1998, Reinharz, 1992). If there is a feminist methodology, in what way does it differ from non feminist methodologies ?

Standpoint Epistemology

As Smart (2009:296) has pointed out, feminist critiques were based on the conviction that sociology should better represent the lives of ordinary women, lives which were either ignored or presented in one dimensional terms. Feminists, beginning with those within the empirical tradition, queried the ‘male epistemological stance’, challenging its ostensible objectivity while not recognizing ‘its own perceptivity’ or its subjection of the world it observes. McKinnon(1982:23) suggests that this is a form of power which enables the world to be created from a male point of view. Feminist empirical epistemology did not directly reject the possibility of using the traditional methods of social inquiry, but rather sought to contextualise these methods, critiquing the way science was practiced while leaving intact the concept of the scientific exercise itself (Letherby, 2003:43, Olesen, 2000:223).

In contrast to these ‘male- defined epistemologies’ which deny the importance of the experiential, the private and the personal, two later epistemology traditions seek to focus on the personal, private and subjective aspects of women’s lives which have traditionally been ignored by the male (apparently) objective stance. Maynard (1994:14) summarizes the feminist research task succinctly: “Feminism must begin with experience, it has been argued, since it is only from such a vantage point that it is possible to see the extent to which women’s worlds are organized in ways which

differ from those of men.” In response to this need to see the world from women’s vantage points, feminist standpoint epistemology suggested an alternative approach to research methodology. In contrast to the detached and analytically oriented approach to science and the production of knowledge, standpoint epistemology, it was believed, ‘would lead to a holistic, integrated, connected knowledge’ (Millen, 1997:7.2). Haraway (1997:304), one of the leading contributors to standpoint research theory, defines standpoints as “cognitive-emotional-political achievements, crafted out of located social-historical-bodily experience- itself always constituted through fraught, non-innocent, discursive, material collective practices”. From this starting point, Harding suggests that the experience and lives of marginalized people, as they understand them, provide the most significant agendas for the feminist research process (1993: 54).

Reflecting the diversity of approaches within feminist theory itself, standpoint research theory is not a single coherent methodology or epistemology. Olesen (2000: 222-224) identifies the work of sociologists Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 1992), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 1998) philosopher, Sandra Harding (1998, 1996, 1993, 1987, 1986,), and political scientist Nancy Hartsock (1997, 1990, 1983) as providing the diverse disciplinary roots which underpin this approach. Collins, (1990, 1998) (together with bell hooks, 1990, 1984) specifically articulate the standpoint of black women’s material and political experiences.

Despite its influence in feminist research and theory, standpoint epistemology is not without its critics. Smart (2009:296) comments that it was in fact its own ‘most trenchant critic.’ The suggestion that one group’s perspective is more valid or more real than another’s is questionable. It is possible that a feminist standpoint can replace male supremacy with female supremacy! Standpoint approaches may also fall victim to the charge of ‘essentialism’ (Lemert, 1992:69) which tends to limit the experiences of women to those which resonate with traditional identities, for example, that of victim. Gender is experienced in diverse ways by diverse groups of women, and women exercise varying levels of power in varying circumstances, which Hartsock (1990: 171) describes as the ‘concrete multiplicity’ of perspectives. The debates which have raised and answered these claims (Olesen, 2000:224) make it clear that not alone is standpoint epistemology not a single approach, it is constantly being

revised, incorporating theoretical developments from the various disciplines which contributed to its development.

Postmodern/Poststructural Feminist Theories

The 'postmodern turn' has occurred across all sites of knowledge production, including in academic fields such as the social sciences, humanities and professional schools. While modernism can be said to have emphasised generalization, universality, stability, rationality and regularity, postmodernism has shifted the emphasis to positionalities, partialities, instabilities and situatedness (Clarke, 2005). Postmodern perspectives view all knowledge as socially and culturally constructed. As well as their profound influence on every aspect of contemporary human sciences, postmodern and poststructural theories have also made important contributions to feminist theory. Harding (1987:186-188) understands postmodern theories as contributing to a 'voiding' of the possibility of a feminist science, to be replaced by the multiple stories women tell about the knowledge they have (Olesen, 2000:223). From the perspective of postmodernism, there cannot be one universal truth. Truth is rather located only in the values and interests of particular groups. Consequently, any attempt to establish a universal truth or theory is oppressive or an illusion (Letherby, 2003:51). From this perspective 'the search for a unitary truth about the world is impossible, a relic of the sterile Enlightenment: knowledge is 'partial, profane and fragmented' (McLennan, 1995). Claims of universality are considered naive. Millen (1997:7) suggests that rather than seeking out a unifying epistemology, even one which incorporates gender, "we should be constructing multiple discourses." Such a postmodernist approach has been criticised as 'relativist', and in its strictest interpretation, makes an impossibility of theory building for practice in any unified sense.

Despite this postmodern 'cultural turn' within academic feminism, it is not, according to Maynard necessary to entirely jettison structuralist contributions to our understanding of women's experiences. These 'structural' issues are clearly visible in most research into the socio-economic barriers which influence women's ability to leave abusive relationships (Kirkwood, 2006; Dutton, 1996; Wilcox, 1993). Maynard

suggests that it is possible to both acknowledge the significance of culture and discourse without denying that events, relations and structures do have effects outside the sphere of the discursive (1994:20). Such an inclusive approach to theorizing is echoed by Olesen (2000:223) who suggests that feminist research projects draw on elements of several available epistemological approaches. It can therefore be concluded from this short review of the debate that there is no one single research method that can claim to be the feminist method. Standpoint theories and postmodern influences however can provide both a 'gender lens' to guide the choice of methodology. Smart (2009:297) points out that the excitement of the feminist research task has been diminished as many of the challenges it raised have now become the norm. In response to this she suggests that feminist research must take risks again by finding ways to connect with the people who contribute to the research process and finding ways to present complex layers of cultural and social life. That was the challenge facing this research project which sought to both hear and empower abused women in a manner which respected the diversity of individual experiences while also highlighting shared patterns, perspectives and strategies.

CONSTRUCTING A FEMINIST RESEARCH PROJECT.

If, as Harding (1993:54) suggests, "the experience and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them", provide appropriate research agendas for feminist researchers, a study such as this into the lives and experiences of abused women, is a most appropriate 'agenda' for a feminist research methodology. This research, which involved both personal and political influences on important decisions in abused women's lives, needed to respond to Smart's (2009) challenge to find ways to hear and represent these complex layers. As the discussion above has indicated, such a methodology should be able to take account of the sensitivity of the issues involved, while remaining open to the possibility of diversity amongst the narratives of these experiences. Kelly et al (1994: 46) are quite adamant when they comment that "most of the methods which have been endorsed as "feminist" were not created by feminism: in-depth interviews, ethnography, grounded theory and action research all have non-feminist origins and histories". Reinharz suggests (1992: 249) that feminism supplies the perspective, while individual disciplines supply the methods. It was necessary therefore, before raiding the methodological tool box in the design of this

study, to identify the criteria which would inform a complex feminist standpoint research project.

The following criteria were identified as necessary in research undertaken about and with women from a feminist standpoints approach:

- Feminist research tries to take women's needs, interests and experiences into account and aims at being instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another (Duelli-Klein, 1983:90).
- It should provide understandings of women's experiences as they understand it, interpreted in the light of feminist conceptions of gender relations (Ramazanoglu, 1989).
- Feminist research methods are methods used in research projects by people who identity themselves as feminist or as part of the women's movement (Reinharz, 1992:6).
- Feminist research uses both women's own 'different' experience as its point of departure and processes this experience in a manner which leads to liberating knowledge (Lundgren, 1995:25)
- It values the private and personal as worthy of study (Letherby, 2003:73).
- It develops non exploitative relationships within research (Letherby, 2003:73).
- It values reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of research (Letherby, 2003:73).
- It must finds ways to present the complex layers of social and cultural lives in sentient ways (Smart, 2009:297).

Added to these feminist research criteria were the researcher's own goals in carrying out this study. These were to 'hear' women's narratives in a manner which would enable them to contribute to the development of professional practice with abused women by allowing professionals to better understand the personal and cultural complexities which inform and shape women's decision making in the face of severe intimate abuse. These criteria therefore suggest that a study into the lives of abused women must attend to the experiences of women's lives from their perspectives, must attempt to address oppression within women's lives, and must do so with a high level of awareness of the issues of reflexivity, objectivity, and participation by those whose

experiences are being studied. The methodology chosen must therefore satisfy these criteria to enable women's narrative to be heard with as little external interference as possible, and to enable them to influence professional practice and decision making. In choosing a suitable methodology, it is also worth keeping in mind Law's (2006:7) reflections on modern scientific research, which he suggests, must 'articulate a sense of the world as an unformed but generative flux of forces and relations that work to produce particular realities'.

Having outlined these criteria and research goals, the question then has to be answered -what research methodology can fulfil these criteria? As Mason (1997:12) notes, qualitative research methodologies have become almost obligatory for feminist research. However, a qualitative research method was utilized in this study not because it has become fashionable to do so but because it answered the needs of the research problematic and fitted the criteria discussed above. In methodology terms therefore, the method chosen had to be collaborative, inductive, and iterative. The sample of women invited to participate in the study should be capable of providing both validity and reliability. Consequently a purposive and theoretical sampling process was utilized. The implications of these criteria in the choice of constructivist grounded theory and the detail of the methodological procedures will be outlined in the following sections.

CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

As the title suggests, constructivist grounded theory is a more recent development (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006) of the well known and popular (Bowen, 2006:2, Bryman and Burgess, 1994:220) methodology originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1978) and later by Strauss and Corbin, (1990, 1998). Both the original grounded theory and the later constructivist developments have been well described elsewhere (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 1978). At its simplest, grounded theory can be described as a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data which is gathered and analysed in a systematic fashion (Strauss and Corbin 1998:158). As originally presented by Glaser and Straus, (1967) in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, the theory was a counterpoint to the then dominant structural functionalism of contemporary sociology (as represented particularly by Parsons, 1968 and Merton, 1945) which they regarded

as overly structuralist, deductive and speculative (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, Charmaz, 2000, 2003). Charmaz (2006: 4-12; 2003:253-256) traces the development of grounded theory from Glaser and Strauss's original elaboration in 1967, through the reformulations by each author individually (Glaser, 1978, Strauss, 1987) and by Strauss with Corbin (1998), and concludes that they are individually and collectively influenced by positivist and behaviouralist traditions and remained 'untouched' by either contemporary epistemological debates or postmodern critiques (2003:255). Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory on the other hand, claims to use grounded theory's guidelines as tools for analysis while not subscribing to the 'objectivist, positivist assumptions' she critiqued in Glaser, Strauss and Corbin's works (Charmaz, 2005:509). Charmaz's development of the theory takes a 'middle ground' between positivism and postmodernism, as it 'assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understanding of subject's meanings' (Charmaz, 2003:250). She defines constructivist grounded theory in the following 3 points:

- (a) *Grounded theory strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive;*
- (b) *A focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits, interpretive understanding;*
- (c) *We can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory. (2003:251)*

She summarizes her approach to grounded theory as an explicit assumption that theory 'offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it' (Charmaz, 2006:10). The location by Charmaz (2005) of this methodology mid way between positivism and postpositivism suggests that the analysis and theory building which would flow from a study into women's experiences of abuse could take account of both the structural aspects of women's lives which influence their freedom of action and their individual constructions of meaning and individual responses to this abuse. It also allows for an exploration of the feminist (structural) analysis of intimate partner violence, placing it within each woman's individual meaning making as she responds in her own individual manner, influenced by the cultural and social milieu in which she lives. Charmaz (2005:510) also argues for the

applicability of this methodology as capable of contributing to social justice research and this possibility was another motivating factor in making this choice. Hearing women's narratives from this interpretivist perspective may have added something new to our understanding of women's journeys to safety, but if hearing them does not lead to making a difference to the professional services they encounter as they make these journeys, the methodology and therefore the research project, does not fulfil the criteria set out above,

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Data Collection: Inviting Participation

As Smart (2009) notes, it is at the interface between the lives of ordinary people and the craft of sociological story telling that so many practical, ethical and theoretical problems arise. Research into sensitive topics such as adult intimate partner violence presents the researcher with serious ethical and practical challenges. These ethical implications impacted on the practical difficulties of contacting women whom the researcher could invite to participate in the study interviews; i.e. women who had experienced intimate partner violence, who were willing to discuss an issue that they might perceive as 'shameful' or stigmatising with a stranger, and who would not be endangered by participation in the project. As the researcher is not currently working either with individual abused women, or with an agency which provides services to such women, women were invited to participate through the medium of a third party. This lack of familiarity with the women or the agencies involved in the study is seen by Morse (1994:27) as an advantage as it reduced threats to the validity of the data. Social Work Managers in three Health Service Executive areas and the managers of four voluntary agencies providing refuge and other support services for women were approached. They were sent a written outline of the study and asked to approach women whom they felt would be willing to participate. The only criteria for selection were that the woman was currently in or had recently left an abusive intimate relationship and that she felt safe enough to participate in this study. All of these managers did contact women on behalf of the researcher and subsequently gave her the phone numbers and addresses of the women who agreed to participate. The researcher then rang each woman and explained to her the purpose of the research and the means by which the interview would be recorded. Each interview would be tape

recorded and the tape would be transcribed for analysis. Once the analysis was completed a summary would be prepared in both written and audio formats and this would be discussed with the participant at a second interview. Having understood these procedures surrounding the process, all but two of the women who were contacted by the researcher agreed to be interviewed.

Hearing the Women's Narratives

In view of the commitment of the researcher (discussed above) to a collaborative and inductive methodology which would allow the women's voices to be heard with as little filtering as possible through a professional or academic lens, an intensive unstructured interview style, which facilitated dialogue and as far as possible, equality, was used in the interviews. As Charmaz (2006:16) notes, 'people construct data', therefore the data gathering phase of the research process must facilitate the hearing of what she describes as 'rich data' (2006:10). Listening or 'hearing' however is a more complex task than researchers are sometimes willing to concede. As Back (2007:12) points out, researchers have to accept that their view of the world combines both insight and blindness. Awareness of our 'blindness' must be a constant companion in our data collection methods. What he describes as 'socially determined forms of authority' can emerge from research which may have involved the narratives of ordinary men or women but when professional interpretation has been superimposed on these narratives, they are no longer the voices of ordinary people and become the authority of the professionals. Reducing the scope for the researcher's 'blindness' while enhancing the scope for participants' insight was therefore another criterion in the choice of methodology. The 'in-depth' interview fulfilled this criterion by reducing the voice of the researcher. The in-depth' interview (also known as 'intensive' interviewing (Sarantakos, 2005: 282) was developed by Minichello et al (1990) and allows for great flexibility, continuity of thought and a high level of quality information. It is therefore a useful method for interpretive inquiry (Charmaz, 2006:25). Because of its flexibility, it requires considerable empathic interviewing experience and an in-depth knowledge of the topic on the part of the interviewer. The researcher's professional background and experience enabled her to create the rapport with the participants which permitted the use of this interview method. The interview

method was also influenced by the methodology of the ‘narrative interview’ which was originally developed by Schutze, (1976, cited in Flick 2006:172). The narrative interview is constructed as a natural communication process which encourages the interviewee to tell her story, and the interviewer to listen without interrupting or distracting her (Sarantakos, 2005:279). Hermanns’ (1995:183) description of this form of interview resonates strongly with the approach sought by this researcher.

First the initial situation is outlined (“how everything started”), then the events relevant to the narrative are selected from the whole host of experiences and presented as a coherent progression of events (“how things developed”), and finally the situation at the end of the development is presented (“what became”).

In its ‘pure’ form as outlined primarily by Schutze, (1976), the narrative interview procedure is extremely time consuming. However the constraints placed upon the interviews by the participants’ other commitments such as child care and employment, and the need to have privacy in their homes while the interviews were taking place, made the lengthy narrative interview in its ‘unabridged’ version unsuitable for this research study. Flick’s (2000, 2006) development of the ‘episodic narrative interview’ attempts to overcome this difficulty.

Rather it starts from episodic- situational forms of experiential knowledge. Special attention is paid in the interview to situations or episodes in which the interviewee has had experiences that seem to be relevant to the question of the study.

(Flick, 2006:182)

From this more limited and restricted perspective, the episodic narrative interview, in conjunction with the flexibility and possibilities for dialogue and elaboration of the ‘in-depth’ interview (Minichello et. al, 1990), were combined to guide the interview method by means of which the data analysed and presented in this study was obtained. The interviews began with a detailed explanation to the participant regarding the purpose and structure of the conversation, and then utilized an opening overview question, inviting the participant to tell her story, as Hermanns (1995:183) suggests- ‘how it started’- i.e. from the beginning of her relationship. As Flick

(2006:182) suggests, an interview guide was used to orient the interview to the areas from which the narrative was invited i.e. the narrative of her relationship, including the abuse and her responses to it.

Theoretical Sampling

The concept of ‘purposive’ or theoretical’ sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:201) guided the determination of the size of the sample. As Bowen (2008:140) points out, theoretical saturation, which is sampling on the basis of concepts which have proven theoretical relevance to the development of the evolving theory, is a consequence of theoretical sampling. It means in effect, sampling to the point of redundancy (Bowen, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The constant comparison method is another core feature of grounded theory methodology (Bowen, 2008: 139;Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) which facilitates the operationalization of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Bowen, 2008:138). Constant comparison involves comparing and integrating incidents and statements relevant to each theme that emerge from the data. Consequently, sampling, data collection and data analysis continued contemporaneously. This enabled the researcher to identify when little new was being learned, when narratives were beginning to repeat concepts and themes, indicating that ‘saturation’ had been reached and comprehending was complete (Morse, 1994:30). The researcher therefore continued to approach agencies to refer women to the study, until it was felt that no new material or concepts were emerging from the interview analysis. This point was reached after ten interviews. In this grounded theory approach to sampling, the researcher does not emphasise the generalizability of the sample, but rather focuses on the sample adequacy (Bowen, 2008:140). However as Bowen (2008:139) also points out, the concept of theoretical saturation remains nebulous and the process ‘lacks systematization’.

Second Interview

The concept of ‘theoretical sampling’ also involves constructing tentative ideas from the data and then examining these ideas through further empirical enquiry (Charmaz, 2006:102). Returning to the participants for a second interview facilitated theoretical sampling by permitting the researcher to explore the theoretical framework which

appeared to be emerging from the simultaneous conceptual analysis. The second interview was also a form of the later stages of the narrative interview technique (Flick 2006; Sarantakos, 2005:280) as it gave the participants an opportunity to assess the emerging narratives at a higher level of abstraction and clarify recurring themes and interconnections. As Morse et al (2002:16) note, returning to interview participants a second time is 'orientated toward eliciting data to expand the depth or address gaps in the emerging analysis'. Enabling the participants to read and comment on the emerging theoretical analysis was therefore a conscious decision in the researcher's efforts to reduce the potential for 'blindness' (Back, 2007). However, the use of the second interview was not simply an aspect of the methodology which facilitated theoretical saturation and the refining of the data analysis. It served another essential purpose in this research project as it facilitated the collaborative methodology which maximised the participants' voices and representation in the study. The manner in which this aspect of the project interacted with the process of reflexivity and the overall research goals will be discussed in a later section.

Prior to the second interview a summary of each participant's first interview was prepared in both written and audio formats. When the researcher was in contact with each woman to finalise the practical details of the second interview (time, place, etc.), each was offered the opportunity of reading or hearing the summary prior to the interview. However, none of the participants wished to read it before the interview, and all read their summary at the beginning of the second interview. None availed of the opportunity to hear it on audio tape. The analysis of the second interviews highlighted and narrowed the emerging categories which were then refined into the themes from which the study's theoretical analysis of women's journeys to safety was developed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Strauss and Corbin, (1998:13) describe data analysis as the 'interplay' between the researchers and their data. The analysis of the data is the stage of the research process which Morse (1994:30) describes as 'synthesizing'. This is the merging of several narratives, in order to find a composite pattern which illuminates the meanings of

these narratives. It is moving from the individual stories to a more general composite stage of understanding, searching for commonalities of experiences and meanings which enable the researcher not only to suggest common patterns of experience, but which can in turn illuminate the individual story .

In order to do this, the narrative interviews were transcribed, producing what Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) described as a ‘vast amount’ of unstructured data. One of the major strengths of grounded theory is that it provides tools for analysing this vast amount of data. Charmaz (2006: 43,45) defines qualitative coding as ‘the process of naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data’. ‘It generates the bones of the analysis’. The ‘tool’ used in this study was what Charmaz (2003:258) describes as ‘line by line’ coding, that is each line was meticulously coded without prior categories, which allowed the emergent ‘in vivo’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:105) concepts to appear . This is a creative process, which inevitably involves the interpretative powers of the researcher, and therefore raises questions about the ‘neutrality’ of the process. Just as the research participants construct the data, the researcher constructs the codes. Awareness of the influence of the researcher on this process of analysis of the participants’ voices is also central to the issue of reflexivity.

Coding gives the researcher ‘analytical scaffolding’ on which to build their theory (Charmaz, 2005:517). The initial codes facilitated the ‘selective or focused’ codes which would be identified in the later interviews (Charmaz, 2003:260). From these initial and later focused codes, categories or themes emerged, which were a step closer to a more abstract theoretical framework. The following is an example from one of the narratives of such initial and focused codes identified in the line by line coding.

TABLE 1: INITIAL AND FOCUSED CODES (See attached sheet)

This process of initial and focused coding and the identification of themes also enabled the researcher to engage in the constant comparative method discussed above in relation to theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser and Strauss, 1969; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Bowen (2006:5) describes this aspect of the constant comparative

method as an iterative process which helps to ‘identify the latent pattern in multiple participants’ perspectives, as specified primarily in their words’. This process facilitated the convergence of themes, whereby the themes (for example, the woman’s sense of identity) moved from a lower level of abstraction to become major overarching themes rooted in the concrete experience of the data (Bowen, 2006:5, Chamaz:2003:260).

This process of focussed data analysis elicited the following 8 major themes on which the theoretical analysis was based

- (1) *Establishment of the Relationship:*
- (2) *Woman’s Identity:*
- (3) *Partner’s Abusive Behaviour:*
- (4) *Woman’s Resistant responses to abuse;*
- (5) *Woman’s Reflections and Construction of meaning:*
- (6) *Turning point in relationship/ Catalyst for leaving/ending:*
- (7) *Exit Strategies:*
- (8) *Survival Resistance:*

These overarching themes subsumed a number of codes: for example the major theme of ‘*Partner’s Abusive Behaviour*’ is a higher order focussing of the codes relating to a range of abusive behaviours, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, threats, rape and coercive control. The point of ‘theoretical saturation’ (Bowen 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) is reached when no new codes have emerged from the data. At this point the presentation of the data in the form of theoretical analysis was prepared- what Morse (1994:33) describes as ‘the sorting phase of the analysis’.

Constructivist Analysis and Theory Development

In carrying out this analysis, the research was guided by Charmaz's (2006, 2003:274) interpretation of grounded theory, which seeks to remain 'emergent and interactive', in contrast to the more prescriptive guidelines proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). It assumes that people, in this case the women who participated in the study, create meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them (Charmaz, 2003:269; Blumer, 1969). The emphasis therefore was to represent as faithfully as possible the words and experiences of the study participants, together with the meanings they constructed for these experiences (keeping in mind the challenge to representation by any voice mediating that of others). Furthermore the task of the researcher is to present these words and experiences within a framework which can be understood and utilized by others who have not directly heard these voices. This is the challenge of constructivism- seeking meaning- both respondents' meanings and researchers' meanings (Charmaz, 2003:275). However, in facing this challenge, the researcher must also keep in mind that such analysis is merely a representation. As Law (2006) points out, contemporary methodology can manifest reality while at the same time generating non reality and 'Otherness'. Confronting this challenge became part of the task of 'empowering' the participants, the 'political' challenge of the research task.

While aware of this possibility of multiple realities and the 'authority' of the professional researcher, the principal themes identified in the participants' narratives, became the ingredients for a model of analysis proposed by the research study.

Theoretical Model of Analysis

This model proposed a perspective on women's responses to abuse which brought together the women's construction of identity, their construction of the meaning of their relationships and the violence which emerged within them, and their resistance to this violence. The model traces a woman's journey into an intimate relationship, from a starting point of optimism with an identity which has been shaped and constructed by personal and family experiences, as well as by dominant social and gender discourses. These experiences and discourses enable her to reconstruct the meaning of events and experiences in her relationship, enabling her to maintain congruity between her affections for her partner, her hopes for a 'normal' relationship

and family life, with the reality of the relationship as it unfolds. As the reality of the relationship becomes more consistently abusive, controlling and violent, her responses become forms of strategic resistance of considerable variety and ingenuity. These forms of resistance vary in their effectiveness in the short term, but as the relationship and abuse continue, they also demand and involve a reconstruction of the meaning of the relationship itself in order to reduce the dissonance between her identity (including her expectations and hopes for an intimate relationship) and the reality of the abusive situation with which she is confronted. If the resistances do not succeed in reducing this dissonance, rupture of the relationship is almost inevitable. The nature and timing of the rupture, however, will depend on the confluence of a range of factors, including perceptions of risk, perceptions of resistance effectiveness, energy, and the level of dissonance between her preferred identity and her situational experience. Most importantly of all, however, the timing of the rupture and the achievement of safety will depend on the availability and effectiveness of external support and services. Once the crisis and challenge of this rupture point is negotiated (more or less) effectively and safely, the next phase of survival and adaptation to a new life with new challenges to identity and meaning is embarked upon. The level of safety and satisfaction with the post abuse identity and social context will be influenced by economic factors, the availability of social and personal support, and levels of post separation harassment.

Recontextualizing

The final stage of this research process was what Morse (1994:34) terms 'recontextualizing', and she suggests it is the real power of qualitative research. In this stage, the emerging theory is presented so that it becomes applicable to other settings. It is merged with and recontextualized by previously established theory, which provides the mechanism to demonstrate the usefulness of the emerging theory. As Clarke (2005:12) has noted, there has been a 'problematic pretence' in traditional grounded theory methodology that researchers can come to their study with a blank mind, (*tabula rasa*). She asserts on the contrary that researchers come to their work 'already infected' by the insights and findings of previous research. Such was the case in this study as the researcher was experienced in both professional practice with abused women and with much of the literature which has developed around this topic. The term 'sensitizing concepts' has been utilized within grounded theory to define

these ‘starting points’ (Glaser, 1978). The term was originally defined by Blumer (1954:7) as suggesting ‘directions along which to look’. Charmaz (2003:259) refers to them as the ‘background ideas that inform the overall research problem’. The researcher’s professional background alerted her to the continuing concern to better understand the processes of seeking safety from violence and the complexities which guide women’s decision making. Examples of these concepts are ‘resistance’ in the work of Alan Wade (2007, 2000, 1997) and Liz Kelly (1988) and the construction of meaning in the work of Neimeyer (2000(a), 2000(b), 1998, 1995). Such prior knowledge of the substantive field is seen by Clarke as a valuable aid to the research process (Clarke, 2005:13). The ultimate goal of recontextualizing in this project was to add to the growing understanding of abused women’s individual decision making within the overall context of structural limitations and ‘political’ barriers in order to improve professional supports for abused women. The data analysis and theoretical model resonated with much of the extant contemporary literature but added to and enhanced this knowledge in a manner which suggested possible enhancements to professional practice. By achieving this goal it can be said to be an attempt to reduce the ‘othering’ of abused women by professionals who expect women to behave as they (the professionals) see fit.

REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity, as Bonner (2001:267) notes, raises a fundamental issue for modern social enquiry. Finlay and Gough (2003:ix) define it as the ‘thoughtful self aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched’. While there have been many approaches to the interpretation and practice of reflexivity over the past decade, Finlay’s summary, outlined in Table 2 below, is a helpful overview of the principal aspects of reflexivity which concerned this research project.

Table 2: Principles of Reflexivity (see attached sheet)

The researcher’s motivations and values and the ‘synthesizing concepts, (including, the feminist influences) led the researcher to seek a ‘dialogic retrospection’ which

would facilitate an open and active exchange with participants as partners in the research process. Constructivist grounded theory was chosen to maximise such an exchange, whereby the participants were invited to be co-authors of the project- but it must be acknowledged- co-authors at a distance and in anonymity.

Despite a personal commitment to reflexivity, collaboration and equality, it would be naïve to think that there is not an implicit power imbalance in the researcher/participant relationship, despite one's best efforts at striving for a non-hierarchical relationship. Class or educational differentials cannot be eliminated in a short lived relationship such as this, and while power rests with the participants in the telling or withholding of their stories, eventual power rests with the researcher as she eventually writes the account of this encounter. The researcher was a stranger, seeking information on a sensitive and private topic, which had the possibility of embarrassing or retraumatizing the participants. As Law (2006:94) has pointed out, what is presented does not necessarily speak for itself- it has to be interpreted. This act of interpretation places the power of representation in the hands of the researcher- a power about which the researcher must be aware of and reflect on. Reflexivity grew from the personal awareness of the researcher's own background, biases and ambitions- what Finlay (2003:6) terms 'introspection', and a wider critical reflection on the researcher/participant power imbalance- a mirroring of wider structural power imbalances which many of the participants experienced as users of professional services. It was hoped that the choice of Constructivist Grounded Theory as the methodology for this sensitive research increased the volume of the participants' voices, and enabled this researcher to 'work the hyphen', between Self-Other, to use Fine's (1994:70) term. The researcher therefore echoes Fine et al's (2000:108) ambition to attach lives to social structures and construct stories and analyses that 'interrupt and reframe victim blaming mantras', thus fulfilling Butler's call for emancipatory social work research which promotes social justice (2002: 245 No.3).

In reflecting on the 'messiness' and potential for othering of contemporary social research methodologies, Law (2006) suggests that there is a need for new tools to enable researchers to depict the shifting interactions between different realities. This research study, adopted and amended a feminist oriented constructivist grounded theory in order to develop such a 'tool'. The researcher's awareness of the potential

for 'representation' of the women who participated in the study, of simply adding another study to the vast number of existing studies of anonymous women's voices over which they have no control, led to the addition of an extra layer of 'voice' to the participants. In this manner, by giving the participants the final word on the accuracy of the final analysis, the methodology incorporated a participatory action research approach. Participatory action research has been well described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005; Dockery, 2000) amongst others. Such approaches lead one to see research as 'a social practice' which integrates both its 'political and methodological intentions' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005:559). Not unlike grounded theory, participatory action research has evolved and developed over the past two decades. However, at its core, it is an approach to research which seeks to understand what people do, how they interact with their world, what they value, what it is they mean and what are the discourses by which they interpret their world (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005:565). Heavily influenced by the work of Habermas (1996), it draws on his belief that legitimacy is guaranteed only when people can decide for themselves what is true in the light of their own knowledge and what they regard as morally right and appropriate in terms of their individual and mutual judgement about what is prudent in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Such an approach to research underpinned the decision to carry out the theoretical analysis of the data gathered in the first interviews before returning to the participants to enable them to assess its accuracy and 'rightness' in the circumstances in which they found themselves as abused women. In this manner they were enabled to be the arbiters of that final communication which emerged from the research process, jointly co-authoring the suggestions for better understanding and improved professional practice. The second interview was therefore more than an aspect of theoretical sampling, or an opportunity to clarify or elicit further data, as second interviews are usually understood in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Morse et al., 2002). It was designed in this study to give a power of veto to the participants. By highlighting together the lacunae, and at times, the dangers of some contemporary practices, this analysis can contribute to the 'political' task of changing organizational approaches by providing separate supportive services for women and their children, in order to deemphasise the social work preoccupation with child protection. It also opens up the possibility of working with both abused women and social workers who are currently developing programmes which the research data proposed. By reviewing this

proposed practice, both the validity and utility of the theoretical analysis can be further developed by abused women themselves and not by professional authority only.

CONCLUSION

One of the concerns of participatory action research is 'how practices are to be understood 'in the field', so that they become available for more systematic theorizing' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005:574). This was the goal of this research study- to understand the practices of abused women as they moved into, through and away from abusive relationships in order to propose alternative and deeper understandings of their 'journeys to safety'. The purpose of these alternative understandings was to enable the experiences of abused women themselves to inform professional interventions by developing a theoretical analysis of their diverse experiences. From this analysis a narrative counselling approach to work with survivors of such abuse was proposed, as well as a method of 'de-coupling' this counselling and support from the processes of child protection. Influenced by feminist theorizing and action in the field of woman abuse, this study sought a methodology which fulfilled the criteria of feminist approaches to research, while emphasising the reflexive challenge of representing others' voices and minimising the researcher's voice and therefore her authority to represent 'the other'. Charmaz's (2006; 2003) constructivist grounded theory provided the research methodology which maximised the space for these voices to be heard. The proposals for alternative practices which emerged from the research were based on the analysis of the data which emerged in the intensive episodic narrative interviews (Flick, 2006; Minichello et al, 1990). However, in order to maximise the authority and therefore the power of the participants, a second interview was held with the women in which they were invited to comment on the accuracy and 'rightness' of the theoretical analysis and the consequent suggestions for practice. By incorporating this step, with its possibility to censor or amend the analysis, the participants were drawn further into the process, moving it towards the values of participatory action research. The disparate location of the participants and their need for and right to confidentiality prevented them from acting as a 'collective' in the usual sense of the word. However by participating in this

fashion in anonymity they collectively shared their experiences with those whose task it is to understand these experiences. Their experiences were disparate, yet shared a common analytical 'core' which they all identified with. As was mentioned earlier, when setting out the methodology which could fulfil the goals of this research, the participants were able to articulate a sense of their world as a generative flux of forces and relations that work together to produce a particular reality (Law, 2006). It is hoped that this reality will slowly influence practice, and the next step will be to enable the voices of other abused women to articulate the reality of this changed practice. The ability of this methodological 'tool', as demonstrated in this paper, to facilitate a research process into a sensitive and complex subject such as intimate partner violence, suggests that it would be a suitable instrument in research into other sensitive topics, and therefore is capable of enabling the contribution to social justice which Charmaz (2003) believes is one of the goals of constructivist grounded theory.

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