

## ‘I Must Have Been an Idiot to Let it Go On’: Agency and Positioning in Battered Women’s Narratives of Leaving

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*To be assaulted is to be subjected to an illegal action and confronted with one’s own helplessness and powerlessness. It also requires confronting one’s own actions, aimed at protection and resistance. This article examines the relationships between male violence and female resistance by focusing on agency, i.e. the relationships between power, responsibility and activity as reflected in the various ways battered women positioned themselves in their narratives of leaving. Three basic positions were identified casting the victimized woman as: Wounded, Self-blaming, or Bridge-building. These positions are associated with relational themes such as vulnerability, isolation and connectedness. The overall message of the article is to urge feminists to return to the roots of feminist theorizing of men’s violence towards women, and to include women’s strategies of resisting the violence in that theorizing.*

**Key Words:** *agency, battered women, breakup, divorce, narrative analysis, positioning*

There are no relations of power without resistance; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.

Michel Foucault (1980: 142)

### INTRODUCTION

When a woman is beaten by her husband, she is not only made a victim by his use of violence, but she is also inscribed in a certain category of persons

(‘victims’) and women (‘battered women’). A category such as ‘victim’ is never fixed. It is a product of culture and language and it means different things in different contexts and at different times.

In historical times in my home country, Sweden, battering in the home constituted an integral part of women’s and children’s lives to such an extent that it was difficult to isolate it from other aspects of family life. ‘Victimization’ was not an issue of concern in those days (see further Hydén, 1994). As recently as a few decades ago, victims of violence and other kinds of abuse hesitated to come forward because they were afraid of not being believed or of being blamed for the abuse they suffered. It was female solidarity that provided a basis for a change of women’s possibilities in disclosing private personal experiences of violence. Swedish women formed political groups during the 1970s and shared personal experiences of having been exposed to violent attacks by their husbands, going public with their experiences. What these women had to tell was shocking and incredible for most people.

The women’s movement used the attention attracted by the exposure of the battering of women to define the battering as a public problem. ‘Battered women’ and ‘victimization’ became matters of great concern. The feminist political stance on ‘agency’ foregrounded female solidarity, and shifted the position of the battered woman from that of a woman struggling alone with her batterer to a larger political confrontation with patriarchy. However, feminist theory to date has mainly focused on the pragmatics of intervention and on the position of women as unambiguous victims. Battered women’s ways of opposing and resisting violence are still underemphasized, and ultimately insufficiently examined in feminist discourses of violence in close relationships. Critics of radical feminism, such as Hoff Sommers (1994) and Wolf (1993), would probably argue that the homogeneous and monolithic concept of ‘battered woman as a victim’ is to blame. The basis for this conceptualization is the man/woman dualism, inextricably associated with the respective positions of dominator and dominated. According to Wolf, victim feminism idealizes the notion of the ‘good’ woman and conceptualizes the female victim as having a ‘set of beliefs that cast women as beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels’ (Wolf, 1993: 147), while aggression and violence are attributed to men. Sharon Lamb (1999: 111) argues: ‘One of the worst thieves of victim agency/victim resiliency is the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.’ To inscribe the battered woman in such a diagnosis means focusing on the description of symptoms sometimes found in the person who has been traumatized, and pathologizing her.

The main problem with the dominant feminist victim discourses to which Wolf and Lamb refer is not, as I see it, that it positions women as ‘fragile angels’ and men as ‘violent beasts’, or that the battered woman’s suffering is in focus. The problem is that these discourses tend to *reduce the battered woman to her suffering*. Through the construction of ‘victim’ as a homogeneous and monolithic concept, the battered woman is at risk of reducing her sense of self to one single characteristic – that of being battered. So defined by a man’s action, she will be

at risk of being confined to her suffering. In this article, I draw on Foucault's notion of power relations, and assert that in each story of oppression and suffering there runs a parallel history of opposition. My overall message is to urge feminists to return to the roots of feminist theorizing of men's violence against women, and to include women's strategies of resisting the violence in that theorizing.

#### COULD FEAR CONTAIN RESISTANCE?

In a series of articles (Hydén, 1999, 2000a, 2000b), drawing on a study of women's breakups from violent men, I have traced the women's process of suffering as well as their strategies of resistance in interviews conducted over a period of two years. Could it be, I asked myself as I began this study, that one of the reasons for the lack of attention to the resistance of abused women is that it is so omnipresent that it is, both for the woman herself and for others, difficult to identify? Could it also be, I went on to ask myself, that this resistance often takes subtle, indirect expression, and is not always culturally predictable? And could it be that the dominant cultural discourses of resistance are based on such pre-conceptions about what characterizes resistance that they allow no space for everyday resistance as it has to be exerted by a person living in a close relationship with her perpetrator? There are many indications that this is the case.

One common way of defining resistance, for example, takes its point of departure in the results. This is the definition used by the warrior when he considers the prototypical resistor: one cannot be certain whether or not a man has offered his enemy resistance until he has conquered that enemy. This is also a frequently used way of characterizing resistance by the legal system in rape cases. In the courtroom, the issue being disputed is often not whether there have been sex acts, but whether those acts were perpetrated with or against the consent of the woman concerned. The man claims that the woman agreed to everything, the woman makes the opposite claim. And what is up to the court to decide, then, is whether the woman offered the right kind of resistance. Did she express herself clearly enough? What did she actually do to make what she wanted explicitly clear? *And if she had offered resistance, would he really have been able to do what he did?*

This definition of resistance does not leave any leeway for failure or ambivalence. It can only contain resistance and non-resistance. It categorizes all actions that do not explicitly contain resistance – such as hesitancy or uncertainty – as non-resistance. ('If you really had not wanted to be beaten up, you would have left him long ago.') Failure tends to be defined as insufficient resistance. ('Well, if he wasn't getting the message about what you wanted, you should have demonstrated it more clearly.') In my view, any attempt to characterize resistance that uses dichotomous pairs tends to result in absurdities. In such a model, if a woman breaks up from a relationship this can be interpreted as the ultimate proof of

the man's total superiority and the woman's complete defeat. If she stays, the corresponding interpretation may be that he has proven himself superior and has succeeded in breaking her down. Another thing this definition of resistance leaves no room for is the little everyday actions that may comprise resistance, and which are more likely to be found in a close relationship than an outright state of war.

In my search for as many forms of resistance as possible that can be offered by an abused woman, I have argued for something which may appear far-fetched, namely that the fear abused women feel for their husbands could be regarded as a form of resistance on the part of the women (Hydén, 1999).

The readings closest to battered women's descriptions of fear see them as narratives about pain. Alternatively, they can be read as narratives that have something to say about women's desire and ability to resist. This reading is not completely self-evident, since we usually associate resistance with action. When we read the women's statements as narratives that say something about women's resistance, then fear is seen as an expression of resistance not in that it includes action, but rather in that it constitutes a force which makes the woman notice that what may happen is something she doesn't want to see happen. Fear contains unarticulated knowledge of what she wants and doesn't want. She wants to avoid the undesirable and to attain its opposite. She doesn't want her abuser's lack of respect or his way of forcing himself on her and attacking her body. She doesn't want his diminution of her. The fear includes this type of unarticulated knowledge. Fear, helplessness and resistance are closely inter-associated. I believe that this close relation can be described thus: *fear is the resistance offered by those who are presumed to be powerless*. The fact that the woman is frightened means that she rejects the man's violence, without necessarily having any well-prepared strategy for how she can avoid being re-exposed to it. My main argument in the above article (Hydén, 1999) was that the awareness of this two-fold characteristic of fear, suffering/resistance works to empower the abused woman, while the monolithic concept of fear works to disempower.

#### LEAVING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

In this article, I make a somewhat stronger case for my claims that resistance plays an important role in battered women's lives, since I take as my point of departure women in the process of leaving.

When battered women take the initiative to separate, I view this act of leaving as a major act of resistance. It is a multifarious act. Ending a violent relationship means dissociating powerfully from the violence. This powerful act, however, does not necessarily meet with success. It may have serious consequences such as the man's revenge, his attempts to prevent the woman from leaving him, and so on. The woman is not sure whether or not her action will be successful. Many women fear that the man will become even more violent after the separation, and

this is often the case. The woman may perform this major act of resistance, but she does not have control over its consequences.

#### RESEARCHING THE PROCESS OF LEAVING

For many years I spent one evening per week at a shelter for battered women in Stockholm, Sweden, in my capacity as a licensed psychotherapist. The study on which this article is based traces its origin to numerous encounters with women who had left violent men.

Over the course of a year, about 40 women stay at the shelter for some time. The length of their stays varies greatly, from a week or so up to a full year. Between 20 and 30 percent of the women are of Swedish (or other Nordic) origin, while between 70 and 80 percent are non-Nordic, first generation immigrants and refugees. This division has not changed significantly over the years. Socially, this is a comparatively homogeneous group of women from the working and lower middle classes.

One evening I was approached by one of the women who was staying at the shelter and asked straightforwardly to analyse the process of leaving an abusive husband and to write about it. 'They say that you are a researcher, is that so?' she asked, and continued: 'If so, I would encourage you to do some research that is very urgent. You see, when you first come here you are so paralyzed with *fear* . . . and you think it is never going to stop . . . but it does . . . you move on . . . you find new problems but also new sources of joy. . . . I have never seen anything written about the whole process of leaving . . . maybe you can do it?' Upon due consideration, I made up my mind to accept the challenge.

#### *Informants*

I looked for a group of 10 women whom I would be able to follow over the course of two years. For linguistic and cultural reasons I sought my informants in the group of Swedish and Nordic women. I deemed it to be too difficult in this study to really do justice to the stories told by the non-Nordic women. All the women had been subjected to repeated and serious violence in their marriages. Serious violence is defined as violent actions, e.g. kicks, punches, threats with a weapon, etc. Repeated violence means violence that is so frequent that it has become an integral part of marital life. Six of the women were employed in the public sector, five in lower positions in the area of health and medical care. One of the women was more highly educated and worked in private industry; one woman was a student; one was a housewife; and one was unemployed. The ages of the women ranged from 21 to 45. Altogether, the women had a total of 16 children living at home and two adult children. Six of the ten abusive husbands were of foreign origin. Of the four husbands of Swedish origin, two had criminal records and one had a serious drug abuse problem.

The scenes of violence in the six relationships where the partners had different backgrounds were characterized by a more or less pronounced tension between the women, who viewed violent acts from a Swedish perspective, and the men, who understood what happened within other cultural contexts. Men from other cultural backgrounds generally did not share the same understanding as their Swedish wives that marital violence is unacceptable. They tended to find wife abuse legitimate under certain conditions. These contradictory positions put a special strain on the abused women in that they felt responsible for informing their 'ignorant' husbands about the unsuitability of their behaviour.

### *Interviews*

I approached my informants not as the shelter's therapist, but as a researcher trying to track down the process of leaving, after being requested to do so. I share the basic commitment of feminist psychologists from many backgrounds to emphasize the importance of knowledge gathering as a personal activity, in which the researcher and the researched are recognized as in relation to one another.

However, I consider my own contribution to this reciprocal relationship to be relational in a very special sense, which is to construct a framework and a relationship in which my informant can feel free and have the opportunity to discuss her thoughts and feelings. I strive to develop a form for interviewing based on the assumption that the research interview can be understood as a relational practice that places at the informant's disposal a framework for extending her understanding (cf. Hydén, 2000a). I try to gain access to her associations, her inner logic and understanding (or possibly her absence of inner logic and understanding) about what happened.

In other words, if I consider myself in the interview situation, I restrict this to my attempts to understand how I could provide the optimal framework for enabling the woman to enter into a dialogue with me. A research interview constructed in this way has many similarities with a therapy session, with one decisive exception: there is no agreement in the research interview to strive to achieve change. Having said that, the potential for change must not be underestimated in a research situation constructed such that a woman is requested to describe her experience to another woman who is present in every sense of the word. The researcher has also declared, in advance, that the narratives are so valuable that they will form a basis for gathering and expanding gendered knowledge in the domain of men's violence against women.

I met each informant for these interview sessions on six separate occasions over a two-year period. The first interview took place at the women's shelter one or two weeks after the woman arrived. The five subsequent interviews took place in the women's homes at about four-month intervals. Prior to the first interview, I prepared only two questions: 'Why did you leave the marriage at this point?' and 'What is your life like right now, what is most central to your life right now?'

The second question was repeated at each of the later interviews: 'How has your present life been affected by what you have gone through?' and 'What do you think about those violent events now?'

### *Analysis*

Faced with 60 hours of tape-recorded and transcribed material, I oriented the first round of analysis towards the content of the interviews. I listed topics and subtopics and divided the transcript into sections based on this topical analysis. One topic appeared to overshadow all others in the first, second and third interviews. It was *fear*, an emotion that dominated the women's lives completely. I found the content of the descriptions quite comprehensive, and various aspects of fear were touched on (cf. Hydén, 1999).

The two major questions the women were asking themselves at the time of the third and subsequent two interviews were, 'How will I be able to manage my new life?' and 'How could I stay for so long?' These two questions were interrelated in the respect that when a woman spoke about being in the process of claiming and arranging her new life – organizing a new place to live, childcare, making female friends a bigger part of her life, etc., this narrative went hand-in-hand with questions such as 'How could I have stayed for so long?'. Once these topics were brought into the interview, it became very clear to me that the women were speaking from the domain of the present 'now' looking back at the past 'then'. The women talked about the highlighting of certain past conversations as more or less acceptable examples of 'talking now'. The big differences between 'now' and 'then' were the processes of separation the women had been through. As a consequence, more or less consciously, they had discovered their own ability to take action. When the women told me about what the violence meant to them today, they positioned themselves as central actors in their own life stories. Each of them had something to say about how they had been able to bring about change in their lives, and each was driven by the power of their storylines concerning their recently recognized capacity for action and its associated positions.

On the basis of my interest in tracking down the parallel history of opposition, I wanted to analyse in some detail the parts of the interviews that contained the interrelated topics of 'How will I be able . . .?' and 'How could I stay . . .?' For this part of the analysis, I needed to leave the domain of thematic analysis and focus attention on the discursive strategies and positions adopted by the women in their narratives about leaving abusive relationships. In short, I had to change my analytic strategy.

My approach was to identify parts of the interviews that contained accounts concerning the topic, 'How could I stay for so long?' I marked parts where this topic was presented in a narrative form. My concern in this first round of narrative analysis was to identify the narratives in terms of structure (cf. Labov, 1972; Riessman, 1993).

This methodological strategy rewarded me with a set of narratives of personal

experience, in which the women became deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events of the past. This was no surprise. Narrative is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity (Linde, 1993; Mishler, 1999). Because of my analytical interest – theorizing about women’s experiences as victims of male violence – analysing the structure of the narratives was never an option. I was not interested in narratives per se, only as a means for the creation of an individual self and of the performative aspects of this process. To serve my purpose, I had to concentrate the narratives further. In a second round of narrative analysis I searched for the various plots, for the different storylines that held the stories together, and the subject positions from which they were told. In my way of using the concept of ‘subject position’, it incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location within the structure of rights and duties for the people who use that repertoire. Once a person takes up a particular position as their own, that person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position, and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts relevant within the particular discursive practice in which the person has positioned him- or her-self ( cf. Davis and Harré, 1990).

In this second round of analysis, I found that three different storylines, accompanied by corresponding subject positions, which concerned the topics, ‘How should I be able. . .?’ and ‘How could I have been in that . . .?’, were frequently elaborated in the interviews. I called them *the position of the Wounded*, *the Self-blaming* and *the Bridge-building*. Some women spoke exclusively from one of these positions throughout the series of interviews. Other women could use them in parallel and change positions over the course of the interview series, and yet others changed positions during the course of one single interview. Almost every woman spoke from the position of the Wounded in the interviews conducted soon in time after they went to the shelter. The majority of the women abandoned this position after some time. Some never left it. Almost every woman spoke from the Self-blaming position on one or several occasions during the two years of the interviews. Some women abandoned this position after some time. Some never left it. Only a few women spoke from the Bridge-building position, the position that offered them a possibility of reconciling the differences between their lives then and now. I illustrate each of these positions below with excerpts from interviews with three different women. I selected these particular women because, more clearly than the others, they spoke exclusively from one position throughout the interview series.

#### THE POSITION OF THE WOUNDED: ‘HE SPOILED EVERYTHING’

In example 1, Christine, a 42-year-old woman, is in her sixth interview. She is currently living in a rented apartment on her own and is working at a home for the elderly. None of her three children lives with her. Her two sons, 19 and 12, live with their father. Her daughter, 21, lives abroad. She is still hiding from her



husband. He does not know where she lives or works, and her sons have to keep that a secret. She sees her younger son regularly, and the older one sporadically. At the beginning of the interview she recounts her husband's influence as imposed on her.

*Example 1: The 'dialogical' and 'resistant self' in the position of the Wounded*

- 68 I have never been allowed to decide for myself what I wanted.  
 69 He almost always decided how I should dress.  
 70 He decided, and when we went out together . . .  
 71 I'm not used to saying hello to anyone or looking at anyone,  
 72 you have to walk with your head down,  
 73 like, you can never be yourself.  
 74 You weren't allowed to look at anyone.  
 75 He decided everything at home.  
 76 Everything.  
 77 Absolutely everything.

In this narration, 'he' denotes Christine's former husband. She positions him as the powerful acting agent, issuing orders and demanding obedience, in line 69 ('He almost always decided . . .') in line 70 ('He decided . . .') and in line 75 ('He decided everything . . .'). In autobiographical narratives the teller usually denotes the self by using the pronoun I. In this excerpt, I note the tension and dialogical interplay in the use and switching between the pronouns 'I' and 'you'. Christine denotes herself as 'I' in line 68, but switches to 'you' in lines 72–4, still denoting herself. By using the 'you', she distances herself – not from the 'I' but from the 'he'. The interplay between these pronouns creates a narrative space for what I call 'the resistant self'. The man is her dominant force, but he only rules the 'you', not the 'I'. Such variations in pronoun use contribute to her positioning of herself less as a wounded person than as a person resisting domination, although she conceals her oppositional stance.

A few lines further on in the interview, Christine's position as Wounded is reinforced. Christine is depicting the opinion of an acquaintance.

*Example 2: The 'valued self' in the position of the Wounded*

- 109 When I had moved out I was there [where I used to live before]  
 110 Then I met someone I used to know and he said:  
 111 'Just think, you used to be such a ray of sunshine,  
 112 for 15 years I've known you as a ray of sunshine,  
 113 a fantastic girl,  
 114 and this is what your life's been like.'

When she gives this description of herself with affirmative attributes such as 'sunshine', positive judgments such as 'wonderful', and innocent qualifiers such as 'girl', she gets reinforcements for her position as the Wounded and 'pure' victim, as she does in lines 113 and 114 ('a fantastic girl, and this is what your life's been like'). Her self is 'valued' by this reinforcement. The reinforcement is

identified as coming from an external source, a male acquaintance. Her former husband appears in this account, indirectly placed in the category of ignorant and stupid when she refers to the utterances of her acquaintance. Her former husband is described as a man without the faintest idea of what he had and has lost. However, to some extent this way of accounting may challenge her position as Wounded and a 'pure' victim. It is based on a recollection of a dialogue between herself and a man she has known for 15 years. The fact that she had known other men may be in contrast to her narration of herself as the subject of total submission, as in line 72 ('you had to walk with your head down') or in line 74 ('you weren't allowed to look at anyone'). The Wounded position in this account is utterly relational, in that it is dependent on confirmation from others. This reflects a general characteristic. If a woman positions herself as a Wounded and a pure victim, and this positioning is not noticed and confirmed, the position is very difficult to maintain. If she is viewed not as a 'pure' victim but as someone who 'wants to be perceived as a "pure" victim', she will have moral difficulties.

The differences in agency between these two ways of self-positioning are worth noting. In her accounts of her marriage and her relationship with her former husband, she positions herself as powerless and as someone who has turned out to be unsuccessful in influencing her husband to behave in non-violent ways. In her accounts of her relationships with people around her, however, she positions herself as someone who has a positive impact on others; she is their 'ray of sunshine'. This is probably an important supporting factor for her ability to remain self-confident.

In example 3, Christine is relating to the present time. Since she left him, Christine and her former husband have only met once in court. This was when he was sentenced to three months of imprisonment for assault and battery. But he is still very much present.

*Example 3: The 'other' as the dominating force in relation to the position of the Wounded*

- 120 I was on the fourth floor and I saw a car just like his.  
 121 I got so scared, I didn't want him to find me.  
 122 I don't want him to come back and ruin my life.  
 123 I could have gone really far at work. Studied and made something of myself, achieved something  
 124 He has ruined a lot for me.  
 125 [I: Are you thinking about taking up your studies now?]  
 126 I don't know. I'll have to see. I've got to get my finances in order first.

Throughout this part of the interview, Christine denotes herself using the pronoun 'I'. Here, the man is not present as the active oppressor. But he is still positioned powerfully as the covert dominant force in her life, as in line 121 (I don't want him to find me) and line 122 (I don't want him to come back and ruin my life).

I view the fundamental characteristics of the position of the Wounded in these narrations as:

- the man was the active dominant force in her life before, and now he is the passive dominant force;
- he was powerful then and he is powerful now;
- she was powerless then and she is powerless now;
- she was the overtly compliant one and the passive resister then; and
- she is no longer compliant but she is still to a great extent a passive resister.

### *Vulnerability*

A woman in this position is very vulnerable. The basic 'right' accorded to her is the right to be taken care of by others who are in a stronger position than herself. Her 'obligations' are to be grateful, subordinate and humble, and to commit herself to the charge of others. Her rights to make claims are restricted. If she pushes things, she may stand out as powerful and in doing so transgress the boundary of the Wounded position.

### THE SELF-BLAMING POSITION: 'I MUST HAVE BEEN AN IDIOT TO LET IT GO ON'

Christine's account is sharply distinguished from the following narration, in her struggles to (re)construct the haunting memories of a dominant man ruling her life. Here, Eva, a young woman of 27, delivers harsh criticisms of her own behaviour in her two previous relationships, both with violent men. Eva now lives alone with her two children, five and three years of age. They both see their fathers sporadically and Eva is present on most of these occasions. Since the breakup, she has been very ambitious and successful in finding good clerical work that doesn't bring her a lot of money, but enough to support herself and her children and also to give great satisfaction.

Eva has a long history of rising up in revolt against her parents and siblings. She never accepted her father's domineering style of child-rearing, or her mother's constant efforts to make her look and behave like 'a sweet, harmless little doll'. She felt she had very little support from her siblings, who 'just did what they were told'. Her choice of husband upset her parents. The fathers of both her children are immigrant men of color with very little education.

In the fourth interview, we first exchange greetings and I then bring up the issue of the present time, by raising the question, 'What is your life like right now?' She answers that thoughts of the past torment her. Her thoughts are not about the violence, they are more about her own conduct. This has to do with her perceived poor response to the violence, but not to activities of hers that might be linked to the cause of the violence.

*Example 4: The 'dialogical self' and 'resistant self' in the Self-blaming position*

- 10 I think it is so embarrassing
- 11 I'm so ashamed
- 12 it doesn't matter if everyone says I shouldn't be
- 13 I'm ashamed anyway
- 14 'cause I was so damned stupid to let myself be treated like that
- 15 [I: When you say you're so embarrassed when you think about what you let happen, what comes to mind?]
- 16 I mean things like
- 17 why I let him hit me and terrorize me in the first place
- 18 it's been over for a long time now I mean why
- 19 why be involved
- 20 because it's really more my style to say OK this is the end of it.

Eva denotes herself using the pronoun 'I', and in doing so she positions herself as the powerful agent in control of the situation ('I let myself be treated like this', 'I let him hit me'). As a teller, she is reflecting on her response to the severely brutal violence to which she was exposed in the violent marriage – from her position of having been able to resist the violence by getting out of the marriage. However, this quite dramatic change is not included in her narration. In other words, in her way of (re)calling, (re)presenting or (re)evaluating the violence, she talks about the violence in the past from precisely where she is now. She talks from the experience of being a woman capable of mobilizing enough strength to find her way out of not only one, but two violent relationships. She calls attention to the past and she presents and evaluates what happened. In doing so, however, she excludes crucial elements of the past from her story.

One of the distinctive features of this specifically agentive language is its dialogical nature: the 'woman-who-left' is having an interior monologue with the 'woman-who-stayed'. The issue of responsibility is at the core of the conversation. The 'woman-who-left' holds the 'woman-who-stayed' responsible for what she judges as poor performance in response to the violent acts ('so stupid to let myself be treated like that'). She even places responsibility to the extent of turning the 'woman then' into the position of co-offender ('I let him hit me', 'I let it go on'). I consider Eva's remarks about how embarrassed she is ('It is so embarrassing, I am so ashamed') to be expressions that reinforce the judgment of the poor performance of the 'woman-who-stayed'.

During the interview, I was deeply moved by the way Eva talked about herself in this very coherent and non-disruptive way. I found it difficult to listen to the way the 'strong woman' of today was talking 'down' to the woman of yesterday. My question 'what do you mean let yourself?' was in part informed by this difficulty, as I asked her to develop the issue of agency. It was not until then that the man and his actions entered her narration. Before my question, the man was mentioned only once and practically as a co-actor in the narration, almost as a respondent complying with her actions ('I let him hit me').

*Example 5: The 'other' as harmful in the Self-blaming position*

- 21 [I: What do you mean let yourself?]  
 22 yeah that's because today I'd have  
 23 he hit me a whole lot you know  
 24 I must have been an idiot  
 25 why didn't I report him to the police the very first time he punched me?  
 26 why did I let it go on?

Having confirmed her own perceived deficiencies in the role of dominant force in her own life with the violent man ('I must have been an idiot'), for a brief moment in the interview Eva (re)calls what she experienced in her marriage ('he hit me a whole lot you know'). At that moment her facial expression reveals some pain. She then continues her self-blaming talk ('I must have been an idiot') and returns to her calm and collected look. I was not finished with the issue of agency in this part of the interview, so I raised a new question for the purpose of expanding the issue a bit further. First, she answered in the straightforward morally agentive, claiming way in which she had been talking in the interview so far. In the end she expressed some uncertainty and puzzlement.

*Example 6: 'Agentive claiming' and 'agentive puzzlement' in the Self-blaming position*

- 27 [I: Is that what you mean by 'admitting' that you didn't report him to the police?]  
 28 Yeah  
 29 [I: because I assume that you didn't think it really was OK for this to happen?]  
 30 no I definitely don't think it is OK  
 31 but I mean that the way I acted showed that I allowed it indirectly  
 32 I accepted him hitting me and treating me like shit by not calling the police  
 33 I'm not so sure.

I understand Eva's utterance 'I'm not so sure' as a calling into question the notion of acceptance in the utterance before ('I accepted him hitting me and treating me like shit'), although this moment of discursive reflection did not change the overall discourse. However, by (de)constructing Eva's account, her positioning of herself as the powerful one stands out as more ambiguous.

One significant element in the discourse of Self-blaming is that the theme of resistance is not present; there is no report of efforts that could possibly have been made in order to prevent the violence. In Eva's account, there is a gap between what she wished to obtain (not being beaten again) and what happened (that she was beaten again). The idea she brings forward to fill that gap is to reach out for more power and authority.

I view the fundamental characteristics of the Self-blaming position as:

- the man was not the dominant force in her life before and he is not now;
- her solidarity with him and their joint marital project was powerful then but is not now;
- her power then was ambiguous, has become less ambiguous and is increasing now; and

- she has a complex and ambiguous relationship to matters of compliance and resistance.

### *Isolation*

By positioning herself as the powerful one and by blaming herself for not having responded to the violence with forcible enough measures but instead in a way that could be perceived as accepting, the battered woman isolates herself. The responsibility is hers alone. The basic right accorded to a person in her position is the right to be taking care of herself. Her obligations as the powerful one are to be responsible and respectful of others, and committed to helping others rather than asking others for help. As she has few if any of the characteristics of a victim – who is powerless and passive with no influence – she is at risk of not being viewed as a ‘battered woman’ at all.

### THE BRIDGE-BUILDING POSITION: ‘I CAN CHANGE ALL THAT NOW’

Only a few women spoke from the Bridge-building position, the position that offers a woman the possibility of reconciling the differences between her life now and then. Hopefully, there is a time factor involved and more women do achieve this position after more time has passed.

The narration of Maria, a woman of 33, represents this position. Maria works at a day care centre and lives in a rented apartment with her ten-year-old from a previous marriage. The apartment is quite expensive, but she manages. The location is very good; the rooms are bright and spacious. It has meant a lot to her to be able to create this home for her son and herself. She has good contact with the boy’s father (not the perpetrator) and they share much of his care and upbringing.

There are some points of similarity between the Self-blaming and the Bridge-building positions. In both, a dialogue takes place between the ‘woman-who-left’ and ‘the woman-who-stayed’. However, there are significant differences in the way these dialogues are conducted. The focus of the conversation that took place from a Self-blaming position was the past, and the woman was still fixed on what she perceived as her own poor performance *then*, while the conversation from a Bridge-building position uses the present *now* as its baseline.

In this excerpt from the sixth interview, I have just raised the question ‘What is your life like right now?’ Maria smiles at me and says that she knew from the previous interviews that I was going to ask her that, so she has already given it some thought. She has some important observations to report.

#### *Example 7: The ‘dialogical self’ in the Bridge-building position*

12 Well, I can see that I keep going back to my old way and I just feel awful,

13 but it never lasts long, maybe only a couple of days,

14 and I see that I'm doing something stupid again  
 15 taking on people's problems or anger  
 16 and forgetting what I think and how I feel  
 17 which is why I feel so awful  
 18 and that's when I stop a minute  
 19 I sometimes actually hit myself and start thinking  
 20 'I'm so stupid, here I am doing the same thing again'  
 21 but then I usually think 'OK, so I was stupid, so I was crazy'  
 22 but I can change all that now  
 23 that's enough already  
 24 I could never think like that before.

In this account, Maria denotes herself with the pronoun 'I'. She is the active agent. She puts a headline at the end ('I could never think like that before'), placing it as a coda in the narration. She focuses on change, and builds her story around a comparison between past and present. What she refers to as 'the old way' (line 12), was the 'taking on of people's problems or anger' and 'forgetting about herself and how she felt'. She evaluates her 'old way' as 'stupid' (lines 14 and 21) and 'crazy' (line 21) and as having serious consequences (it made her feel awful). The change she is referring to here is not the 'major one' of actually behaving differently, but the 'minor one' of stopping acting the way she did, the way that made her feel 'awful'. As when I identified the 'resistant self' in Christine's story, identifying the 'changing self' here calls for close reading and attention to detail. What she had been able to do, was to 'stop a minute' (line 18) and actually 'hit herself' (line 19), and call her own attention to 'doing the same thing again' (line 20). Being able to do this makes a big difference to her.

A few days prior to this interview with Maria, I had interviewed a woman who was blaming herself strongly for reacting in inadequate and insufficient ways. I was still affected by that experience, and in Maria's narration I was struck by what I perceived as her evaluation of her performance in the past as so typical of her old self. I understood it as, in part, a result of her framing the past in the light of the positive outcome of the present ('I can change all that now'), but I wanted to expand it a bit further, so I asked:

*Example 8: Reaching out for the 'woman-who-stayed'*

25 [I: And before?]  
 26 I just kept on, and kept feeling bad  
 27 felt such anxiety  
 28 I didn't cry or anything, just felt so frightened in a way I can't describe  
 29 a pressure in my chest  
 30 when I feel awful these days  
 31 I can't sleep  
 32 I feel uneasy.

Maria identifies her pain in the past ('I kept feeling bad') and she continues by being a bit more explicit about it ('felt anxiety', 'felt frightened'). This way of reaching out for herself in the past from the perspective of the present, and build-

ing a bridge between past and present makes this position special, compared with the two others. The Self-blamer identified no pain in the past; the Wounded identifies pain in past and present. Maria says that she can feel awful now too, and she uses the word 'frightened', so I wanted to know if her feeling awful today could have anything to do with fear:

*Example 9: The 'other' as no longer harmful in the Bridge-building position*

33 [I: It's not because you are still afraid of him?]  
 34 No, I'm not afraid of him any more  
 35 he doesn't upset me any more, not that way  
 36 this is something inside me  
 37 I think it has to do with my not taking myself seriously  
 38 like I didn't take care of myself properly  
 39 Instead I sort of put myself down by trying to be nice to others  
 40 and forgot to be nice to myself.

In this account, the man is positioned as the separate and no longer harmful 'other'. Maria is the one who could be harmful to herself, in line 36 ('this is something inside me'), and she has identified the source of this alleged harmfulness in line 37 ('my not taking myself seriously') and the lack of attention to herself in lines 39 and 40 ('didn't take care of myself properly', 'put myself down by trying to be nice to others').

I view the fundamental characteristics of the Bridge-building position as:

- the man was not the sole dominant force then and he is not the sole dominant force now;
- her solidarity with him and their joint marital project was powerful then but is not now;
- her power then was limited because of her inability to care for her own needs;
- her capacity in that respect is improving and that means increased power now;
- her acts of resistance were ambiguous and unfocused then, because of her inability to care for her own needs; and
- now it is improving.

*Connectedness*

By positioning herself in a Bridge-building position, the woman casts herself as a person who did not know what was good for her in the past and still does not fully know; who was not able to speak for herself and still is not fully able to, but who is improving. The basic right accorded to her in this position is the right to claim some space for further exploration of her own needs, the right not to be absolutely certain immediately.

Like the other ways of positioning oneself, the distinctive feature of the agentive language of the Bridge-builder is its dialogical nature: 'the woman-who-left' has a conversation with 'the-woman-who-stayed'. The issue of reconciliation with herself is at the core of the conversation. 'The-woman-who-left' reaches out



for 'the-woman-who-stayed' in a critical but understanding way. Looking back, she notices progress. The acknowledgment of strength as well as weakness enables her to take up a negotiating position in reaching out to other people and asking for help. As she is good at some but not all of these things, she can refrain from leaving matters totally to others, and she can also refrain from taking up a superior position in isolation. Resistance is an issue here. Resistance in the Bridge-builder's version is about identifying pain, setting limits for exposure to pain and then bringing it to an end. This can be negotiated, for instance with the help of the police. The negotiations can be about what the woman can do for herself (such as limiting her exposure to violence) and what the police can do (such as protecting her), and the cost of these measures can be assessed.

#### THE 'BATTERED WOMAN': THE STORY OF SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE

Being assaulted means being subjected to illegal actions and being confronted with one's own helplessness and powerlessness. It also means confronting one's own actions, aimed at protection and resistance. In this article, I have examined the relationships between male violence and female resistance by focusing on agency, i.e. the relationships between power, responsibility and activity, as reflected in the various ways the battered women in my study positioned themselves in their narratives of leaving. I identified three basic positions, all with the capacity to cast the victimized woman: the Wounded, the Self-blaming or the Bridge-building. At the same time as I conceptualized the women as individuals through the discursive practices that make these positions relevant, I also made them relational, with one relational theme each: vulnerability, isolation and connectedness.

The language the women used for speaking of their lives with abusive men was dialogical in that it comprised conversations between 'the-woman-who-left' and 'the-woman-who-stayed'. The women cast themselves as opponents to violence, and portrayed their resisting selves in different ways, associated with positioning. When the woman was in the position of the Wounded, the man was still the powerful acting agent, and the woman sensitively expressed her resistance by switching pronouns between 'I' and 'you'. Using 'you', she distanced herself from 'him', but not from 'I'. The Self-blaming woman presented a series of activities of resistance, and accused herself of not having acted accordingly in the past. The Bridge-building woman reached out to herself and in a more forgiving way acknowledged her past inability to support herself.

A woman in transition from being in a violent relationship to being out of it needs to regain control and form a new life. For a woman setting about forming a new life, all positions have both potentials and limitations. The position of the Wounded sets the woman free from guilt and responsibility and brings her sympathy from others. In that way, the position of the Wounded has a lot to offer in the short term, including bringing the woman support from the shelter move-

ment and thereby paving a way out of the abusive relationship. However, all told, in the long run the position of the Wounded is the most limiting of the three, I argue. Confined to this position, the woman is at constant risk of becoming the object of other people's self-imposed 'right' to decide for her. The vulnerability associated with the position as victim makes her exclude accounts of her own strength and of her resistance.

The isolation associated with the Self-blaming position could be perceived as the opposite of vulnerability. In the Self-blaming position, the woman excludes accounts of weakness and failure and cuts herself off from possibilities of support. This difference is only illusory, however. Without support, the woman is alone if she is exposed to further violence from her husband. Without taking her weakness and failure to protect herself into consideration, she is at risk of underestimating his possible future threats and of failing to protect herself again. Most importantly, in isolation she is totally subject to her own harsh criticism. The Self-blaming woman has encountered her strong and active self, and valued her highly, to the point of idealization. She has also encountered her vulnerable victimized self, but she refuses to acknowledge her. She turns away aggressively, self-destructively. The woman in the position of the Wounded, on the other hand, has encountered her strong and active self. She, like the Self-blaming woman has accomplished a breakup, with all the hardship and obstacles it has meant. She does not acknowledge her strong and active self however, but turns away and attracts all the attention to her vulnerable victimized self.

The Bridge-building position seems to be the most favourable one in that it embraces reconciliation and connectness: vital cornerstones of a formerly battered woman's new life. The Bridge-building woman is indulgent with the powerless victim in herself, and the breakup has meant that she has encountered the woman in her that is able to act. She does not position these two women in opposition to each other; she lets them live side by side. For this reason, she has to encounter both the other selves before she can place herself in the Bridge-building position. She has to pass through the two other positions in order to reach the Bridge-building position.

I have intentionally eliminated biographical details and information about the present situation of the women although that information might make it possible to answer questions such as 'What makes some women position themselves as Self-blaming while others position themselves as Bridge-building?' Although these women's accounts naturally exist within such contexts, posing and answering these questions is beyond the scope of this study. My project has been to examine whether and to what extent the concepts 'battered woman' and 'victim' might also include discourses that do not reduce women who have been subjected to violence to their suffering. The women's accounts have contributed to many astute observations and insights to the problem – and made it possible for feminist psychologists to recognize the complexities of battered women's efforts to frame their own experiences.

Selecting three narratives from three different women might encourage the

reader to believe that the concept of 'battered woman' can be constructed as a monolithic concept, although with variations. However, such a conclusion is potentially equally restrictive as seeing the battered woman as one thing only: a woman who suffers. What I wish to introduce is precisely the opposite thought: that the battered woman can be seen from the vantage point of diversity rather than uniformity. In that perspective, 'understanding the subject' would mean to understand the subject as composed of, or existing in, a set of multiple and contradictory positions or subjectivities.

In this perspective, in each of the excerpts, I have presented fragments of the multiple subjectivities of which each of the women is composed. In order to understand each of the women, we need to know more about the continuity of the subject and the subject's experiences of identity.

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