

# **Online support and Domestic violence – negotiating discourses, emotions, and actions**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis makes an original contribution to the study of online support on domestic violence (often referred to as online support communities/groups) through a discursive feminist perspective. Whilst the few previous studies on the topic are limited in scope, this is the first to adopt a mixed methods approach, exploring the topic through three sets of data from one online support forum on domestic violence: qualitative textual analysis of threads (n=215); an online survey (n=70); and two interviews with the manager of the forum and the moderator.

The thesis aims to explore the role of an online support forum for women in the process of ending violence in their lives. Six aspects of online support are explored: forum-host's goals, history and development of the forum; the experience of online support from the perspective of its members; exploring the themes and topics dealt with in the forum; how forum users perceive the impact and relevance of these themes; how members construct emotions, violence, victims and perpetrators in written postings; and how members use violence discourse in support processes. The analysis of these aspects provides a new body of evidence regarding the possibilities of online support groups.

First, interviews with the forum hosts give a unique insight to the challenges with hosting the forum, pursuing moderation, and the limits and possibilities with using a public anonymous space. Second, through the survey, a sample of forum-members describes an eclectic form of mutual support, the experience of moderator's work, and the interaction with other members. The forum's impact on participants' understanding of violence, help-seeking and decision-making is measured. Third, the analysis of threads demonstrates in-depth members' reflexive work (Giddens, 1991) in the forum, which comprehends the whole processes of ending violence, and shows how members use violence discourse to understand violence, manage emotions and encourage specific choices and actions. A discursive theoretical perspective explicates how support processes are enacted within and according to a normative practice. The findings suggest previously overlooked issues, in particular with regard to flexible long-term support for women with experiences of domestic violence (Kelly et al, 2014).

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the role of a support forum for women in the process of ending violence in their lives, and to generate knowledge that can contribute to a discussion of online support on domestic violence more broadly. Studies of online support forums on other topics have increased rapidly in recent years, and researchers have agreed that such groups offer many positive aspects: emotional support; information; coping assistance; and a space in which to construct narratives around a common problem. On the other hand findings also point to online support forums as incubators of strong norms, rules, and ideologies. The problem with applying these findings directly to domestic violence forums is that support needs vary, from processing former or current experiences of abuse to wishing for social change. The three studies addressing online support on domestic violence to date revealed that online support forums: are used as a means to seek information about domestic violence and different forms of support (Westbrook, 2007); can be organically organised around women's efforts to support each other (Lindgren, 2014); and can be a platform for constructing a new identity (Hurley, 2007). However, only the latter study was conducted in a UK context, and no study to date has explored the support from the perspective of the users. This study begins to fill this gap.

The potential for online support can be contextualised within the field of domestic violence and the importance of creating more support opportunities for abused women. Victims of domestic violence tend to have more social and health problems than non-victims, including mental health problems, drug-abuse, physical harm, and interruption of work and social life (Martinez & Schröttle, 2006). Thus, the personal impacts of violence are huge, not only health related problems but also reduced 'life-space' for the person victimised (Lundgren, 2004). The controlling element of domestic violence can make it difficult for women to seek help (Stark, 2007), and a large proportion of women do not report violence because of shame, lack of trust in formal agencies (Walby & Allen, 2004), or limited access to specialised services (Coy et al, 2009). Researchers have pointed out the need for novel support initiatives and more long-term sources of support (Kelly, 1996; Wilcox, 2006), independent of family and friends who may not have the resources or understandings to help effectively (Klein, 2012). Woman's Aid, the host to the forum in this study, is one organisation which pursued such an initiative by starting an online support forum for domestic violence survivors.

From the outset, the approach taken was inductive and exploratory around the role of the forum for the women who used it. Why do abused women seek support online? How do members understand violence, and how do violence discourses shape support processes in the forum? To explore these aims a multi-methodological approach was employed. This enabled the research to create knowledge about the forum from several perspectives: observing and analysing the

conversations themselves; asking the women how they experience and use the forum; obtaining information from the forum host about the forum's development and maintenance. The theoretical framework emerged inductively through data analysis, drawing on the concept of discourse. The rest of this chapter outlines the epistemology used in this research.

## **Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to the philosophy of knowledge, how one can account for what one claims to know (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2003). Central here is the relation between the knowing subject (the researcher), the object (the researched), and the process of knowledge production (conclusions/theory) (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2003). Epistemologically, objectivism is the idea that one can arrive at the truth because reality is conceived as unchangeable and "out there" to be discovered and measured. From a philosophical positivist standpoint, objective value-free knowledge can be derived through our senses, by examining the research object with specific methods such as scientific measurement and statistical inference (Dienes, 2008). Criticism of extreme forms of positivism has been extensive and prompted the development of alternative epistemologies from the perspective of constructionism. Approaching the social world as constructed has been a political tool with which to question the social order (Hacking, 2000). There is, however, an ongoing debate on where to draw the line between what can be perceived as socially constructed and what cannot be constructed (Hacking, 2000). Whilst some perceive the world as entirely constructed, most theorists separate the idea of an object, event, action, and its physical reality in itself, and thereby acknowledge that there is a dimension of reality that exists independently of what is thought of it (Hacking, 2000), the latter is sometimes referred to as 'weak' constructionism and is the perspective drawn on in this thesis. In accordance with the view of Thomas Kuhn, science is a practice within a knowledge paradigm. 'Paradigm', according to Kuhn, is both the specific procedures employed by scientists, and the more global 'worldview' on what counts as valid science and good knowledge (Dienes 2008:165). Kuhn proposed that scientific progress is not based on inherent logical development. Rather, results and progress are products of historically specific research practice (methods and theories). Thus, what are perceived as plausible hypotheses, objective measurements, and theoretically grounded arguments depend on the particular knowledge paradigm in which the research is located (Dienes, 2008). The perspectives on knowledge production that underpins this project are post-objectivists epistemologies. In a feminist epistemological stance, all knowledge is situated and historically and socially specific, and cannot be carelessly universalised (Haraway, 1988). The implications of this are discussed below.

### *The politics behind 'who is saying what'*

Feminists have criticised science for excluding women from knowledge production. By

claiming universal ideas about the world when they merely represented a specific subject (western white men), scientists helped to produce and reproduce women's subordination (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2003). In this sense, feminists have argued that women were not only excluded from the equal opportunity to conduct research, but the lack of women has also shaped knowledge so that it has excluded women's realities. Dorothy Smith (1988) and Sandra Harding (1993) are prominent feminist epistemologists who brought the concept 'feminist standpoint' to the foreground. Harding (1993) argues that the best knowledge can be produced from the perspective of the ones who are oppressed. She names this 'strong objectivity' - the basic assumption for one *standpoint* epistemology. Here, 'standpoint' refers to what, from this strand of feminist epistemology, is a form of objectivism, although limited in reach. Experience has a particular status here, of being able to tell *a* truth, even if this cannot extend to everyone. In contrast, Dorothy Smith (1992) argues that all knowledge is discursively constructed, although academic knowledge - which often is awarded the status of objective knowledge - has been merely functional for, and constructed from, men's realities and practices: this creates a gap between women's realities and knowledge. Therefore, with a slightly different epistemology but similar conclusion, Smith (1992:91) seeks to shift the centre of enquiry, starting from women's experiences.

My notion of standpoint doesn't privilege a knower. It does something rather different. It shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins. Since knowledge is essentially socially organized, it can never be an attribute of individual consciousness.

The problem with all standpoint theories is that they assume that there is a common perspective amongst a larger category of people, for example the category woman. The intersectional perspective has addressed this by developing an epistemology with several standpoints constituting unique positions of class, gender and ethnicity, in intersections rather than hierarchies or layers (Lykke, 2011). What is brought to this project from these feminist epistemologies is that research is never value-free, but is situated in a context. Which questions are asked, what methods are used, and how data is interpreted are political choices that accord space to certain thoughts and experiences, but not others (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2003).

#### *Knowledge production as a discursive and social practice*

Post-modern perspectives reject the distinction between true/false, science/myth, and argue that all reality, including identity and the notion of the self, are temporary constructs (Weedon, 1997). In addition, the meaning of experience is an interpretation of ideas about the world attached to global and local discourses, and social practices. No knowledge is thereby objective or independent of the knower's subjective interpretation of experience, or her context. Here, experience is understood through interpretations of pre-existing ideas outside the self. What is characteristic of post-modernist epistemologies is that they reject claims that knowledge and

reality can be grasped through rationality, because meaning is always produced through a subject's interaction with a context (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2003). Social constructivist epistemology, a strand of post-modernism, further emphasises how meaning arises from the interactions between people. Here, knowledge is co-constructed, and nothing can exist or be known without verification from other people (Kincheloe, 2005). Individuals bring their own experience and knowledge on which new knowledge is constructed.

The epistemology for this project acknowledges that all knowledge is discursively situated and constructed between people, within a social and historic context (Chapter Two). The place from which knowledge is produced matters because pre-existing concepts are interpreted and understood differently depending on how a subject is situated (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1992). In addition, linking subjugated knowledges can contribute to altering and constructing new knowledge and new discourses (Weedon, 1997; Chapter Two).

The project was conducted within the field of feminist research on violence, which seeks to support efforts to end violence against women, and benefit women who have been abused. Here, the focus is on online support for women who have been abused by an intimate (male) partner. Thus, the researcher, members in the forum, the forum host, the moderators, and the research field the project is situated within constitute the limits and possibilities for knowledge production. Theory, method, and analysis have been both facilitated and influenced by this particular research environment. The forum is a women-only virtual space hosted by a British organisation. The sample and the background to the problems discussed are from the point of view of women in the sense that women are the population of enquiry in this study. However, as a medium the internet creates economic and language boundaries for participation (Epstein et al, 2011); the forum is likely to be populated by women who can articulate themselves well in English, and have at least regular, if not constant, access to the internet.

#### *Domestic violence and a (weak) constructionist perspective*

Within the field of domestic violence, researchers have become part of constructing the nature of violence, its magnitude, images of people involved, as well as the strategies employed to solve it (Hacking, 2000; Loseke, 2003). Accordingly, the meaning of violence is 'historically, socially and culturally constructed' and has changed over time (Hearn, 2014:8). This, however, does not mean that violence is "made up". On the contrary, violence always involves bodies, emotions and places (Hearn, 2014), and acts and utterances happen, no matter how they are conceptualised. It is important to make this distinction in order to explicate how approaching domestic violence from a discursive perspective does not make violence less real. Rather, at the heart of this thesis is the interaction between the material and the discursive: between ideas of how the world is constructed, and people's actions, feelings, and practices. Gender is a good example of how once embodied and enacted, specific gender discourses encourage and entitle to

specific actions, including violent practices (Hearn, 2012; Connell, 2009; Lundgren, 2004).

In a similar vein, discursive narratives construct images of people which guide thoughts and feelings about those involved in domestic violence, and which may challenge other discourses (Dunn, 2005; Kelly, et al, 1993; Loseke, 2003). Behind constructions of victim, survivor and perpetrator are real people who interact with these ideas (Hacking, 2000; Loseke, 2003). For some people it may be *liberating* to label acts and utterances as violence (Hacking, 2000), or adopt social categories such as victim or survivor (Dunn, 2005). For others, perceiving oneself as a victim/survivor may change the perception of self in a negative way. Hacking (2000) explains the interaction between discourses about people and actual persons as a 'looping effect'. He uses the example of the woman refugee, who may to some extent be aware of ideas of herself and what is expected of women refugees. She may adjust to, or resist these ideas, and thereby contribute to the development of new ideas about the woman refugee (Hacking, 2000).

## Summary of the thesis

The theoretical framework in **Chapter Two** emerged from the recognition that members of the forum in this study want to reflect on issues around violence. Accordingly, the analysis examines how conceptualisations of violence and ideas about the people involved are employed in support discourses. **Chapter Three** reviews relevant literature on domestic violence from a gendered perspective; social support and help-seeking; and online support forums. **Chapter Four** describes the multi-methodological approach taken in my thesis. This involves analysis of three forms of data from the same online support forum: interviews, an online survey, and text-analysis of postings. The result is presented in four findings chapters. **Chapter Five** reveals that the forum was constructed as an exclusive space for women with experiences of violence but required supervision and moderation. The forum was perceived and used in multiple ways: as a community; as a space to seek information; as a space to access professional advice. The forum was deemed an emotional safe space for disclosure. Reading and writing on the message-board encouraged recognition and understanding of violence; facilitated help-seeking, and influenced specific steps to end violence. There were concerns about the risks of disclosing personal information in a public space. **Chapter Six** demonstrates how members learn a situated meaning of violence through linking specific experiences to the terms emotional/psychological abuse and control. Adopting the notion of violence as a 'complex pattern', helpers affirmed and validated help-seekers in seeing that they were experiencing violence and abuse and that violence is more than the physical act of 'hitting'; members drew parallels between seemingly innocent acts and control. **Chapter Seven** examines the forum as a platform to discuss responsibility for violence, victim-blaming by abusive partners, and underlying cultural beliefs about men, women, and victims. Formulaic stories about 'the abuser' and 'the abused' were

used to reinterpret feelings of guilt as part of an abusive strategy. Whilst abuser discourses helped to understand the partners' actions, victim/survivor discourses could not entirely explicate women's own use of violence. **Chapter Eight** shows how a dominant violence discourse was employed in support-processes to shape a practice on ending violence with specific choices, actions and directions. This involved the use of discursive truths about violence, procedures, and collective narratives about victimisation and survival to prompt women to aim at a separation. **Chapter Nine** integrates the findings from chapters Five to Eight, revealing the forum as a reflexive space to challenge normalisation; gain confidence in a particular perspective of reality; respond to blaming; deal with questions and criticism around formal support; and find other forms of support. Issues around safety, norms and stereotypes are also discussed.

## **Chapter Two: Mutual support as reflexive practice**

This thesis employs discourse theory and its links to emotions, together with Anthony Giddens' (1984) concept of social practice, to analyse the process of mutual support in the forum that is the focus of this study. By employing this set of concepts, the theoretical framework may be vulnerable to criticism as to how the diverse sources have been combined. The advantage of drawing on a range of concepts is that this allows an analysis of how discourses guide processes of identification, emotions, and actions, all of which encompass elements of power. In turn, Giddens' emphasis on reflexivity enables an analysis of how women become motivated to make sense of, alter, negotiate, and appropriate discourses as an interpersonal reflexive process.

### **Discourse theory**

Theorists distinguish 'discourse' from 'discourses' (Gee 2005). The former refers to the constituents of all language and text alongside the set of rules that enables people to construct meaning through speech and actions. Discourses, on the other hand, are described as collective narratives, theories and assumptions of reality (Foucault, 2002; Gee, 2005; Mills, 2004; Weedon, 1997; Wetherell, 1998). The main focus in this thesis is on the latter. One of the most commonly cited definitions of discourses is a threefold:

Sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault, 2002:90).

Foucault separates discourses from discourse. Here discourses are clusters, or groups, of what Foucault refers to as 'statements' – the unit or the building blocks of discourses (Foucault, 2002). Mills (2004) explains that for Foucault, a statement is not any utterance, but one that is accepted as real in the context in which it is used. Statements are: 'those utterances which have some institutional force and which are thus validated by some form of authority – those utterances which for him would be classified as being 'in the true' (Mills, 2004:55). Statements are related to each other systematically according to a set of rules, and this relation is what constitutes the meaning of a discourse (Foucault, 2002:41). Foucault's theory of discourses emphasises that seemingly coherent categories and theories can be de-constructed to reveal separate assumptions of reality. In turn, these assumptions are also contextual and fluent in their meaning. There are many different discourses, both local and global (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000), and they have no clear-cut boundaries (Gee, 2005). Depending on the context they can evolve, include more or less elements, split apart or 'marry' with others (Gee 2005:30-31). Examples of categories that have long been discursively constructed are academic disciplines, which partly prevent researchers from knowing about the works from other disciplines even

when they overlap (Mills, 2004). As soon as the distinction is constructed, the focus is on the differences rather than the similarities.

Discourses are, however, not just assumptions and ideas. For Foucault, discourses and practice should be treated as the same thing (Parker, 1993). He explains that discourses are not: 'an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words [but should be treated] as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 2002:53-54). In a similar vein, Gee (2005) treats discourses as integrated ways of 'being' and 'doing', involving both identity and specific practices. Here, discourses can be analysed as to who is doing what, in which context. Accordingly, discourses involve:

a) situated identities; b) ways of performing and recognizing identities and activities; c) ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools technology, symbol systems, places, and times; d) characteristics ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening (and, in some Discourses, reading and-writing ) (p. 33).

The point here is that discourses organise actual behaviour and identities, involving the whole context in which they occur. At the same time, the meaning of specific discourses depends on the context and the meaning people bring to them through actions and thoughts. Thus, 'statements', that is the building blocks of knowledge, co-exist in a particular way, and thereby form objects and categories, as long as people and institutional practices treat them as coherent systems and acceptable forms of knowledge (Foucault, 2002). The formation of discourses is thereby dependent on people recognising and enacting them (Gee, 2005; Foucault, 2002; Chapter Six). When contrasting discourses point out irregularities and incoherence in dominant discourses, the latter may lose some of their power (Foucault, 1980). In this way, objects, practices and images of people are constituted in a particular way for social rather than "natural" reasons (Foucault, 2002; Gee, 2005). This is why it is necessary to locate discourses in history to understand their purpose and social relevance (Parker, 1993).

## Discourses and the subject

The links between discourses and the subject are debated. Foucault (2002) argued that all knowledge in the world is discursively constructed and organised, including the formation of objects, concepts, subjects and experience. Foucault does, however, not reject that there is a reality outside of discourses, just the thought that we can access it outside them (Mills, 2004). On the other side of the spectrum, the feminist Dorothy Smith (1992) treats discourses as tools and means for people to make sense of their experiences rather than being altogether constituted by them. The gap between dominant discourses of knowledge and women's experiences becomes the point of enquiry for women to construct new knowledge and new discourses

(Smith 1992). Similarly, from the perspective of discursive psychology, Edwards (2006) stresses the importance of language and discourses as tools to define, explain, and verify experience, and to make feelings, thoughts and memories accessible to others. Although these perspectives are often depicted as conflicting, for this thesis they represent important aspects of discourses: how experience is interpreted through discourses and language; the possibilities of altering the meaning of experience through language; and how people can, through discursive constructs, communicate experience and influence others. The crucial point across these theories is that people's understanding of experience shifts depending on the discourses they use to make sense of it.

From a discursive perspective, 'agency' can be understood as the individual's ability to choose, reject and bring meaning to different 'subject positions' (Wetherell, 1998). This process is active but not necessarily in conscious awareness. From a constructivist angle, people use discourses as *strategies to create action*, i.e. to make sense of their actions and to make other people follow certain principles or do certain things (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The subject tries - more or less consciously - to make sense of multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses in order to understand and organise the reality around her. The subject's actions are thus determined by her contextual understanding of the discourses she employs. This perspective gives agency to the individual and her ability to resist and transform discourses through reasoning.

In contrast to constructivists, post-structural theorists see acts of resisting/accepting discourses as an active but unconscious response (Weedon, 1997). The analysis is here less focused on individuals and more concerned with mapping out the number of discourses in play and the ways in which they interact, so as to understand how the combination of these discourses enables or disables individuals. The subject's individual capacity is here irrelevant to the analytic exercise taking place. Mills (2004) notes that whilst post-structuralist discourse analysis is convincing when investigating the complexity of power, it becomes less helpful when focusing on a group of people or an individual.

Although constructivism and post-structuralism are often outlined as two incompatible positions, I follow researchers who seek a middle-ground (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Reavey & Gough, 2000). Accordingly, I deem it useful to switch between the two positions on the subject. This means looking at how people are enabled/disabled through discursive practices linked to institutional force, and also examining how people use discourses in conversations as a form of action/negotiation.

## Gender and identity

Discourses offer many gendered identities, positions and practices which are appropriated by some individuals, and opposed by others (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2009; Weedon, 1997). These

positions have a fundamental impact on the individuals' possibilities, emotions, desires, rights, expectations, aspirations and bodies (Connell, 2009). Butler (2006), following Foucault (1990), explored the intersections between gender, sex and sexuality, and argues that both biological and sociocultural sex are 'discursively constructed'. Such discursive positions may become internalised and embodied (Butler, 2006). Gender theorists further seek to move away from gender identities as imposed or fixed, by treating the (re)construction of gender as ongoing, a form of performance and practice (Connell, 2009; Butler, 2006; Mills, 2004). Gender positions are constantly negotiated, reformed and altered through discursive assumptions about men and women in different contexts. Mills (2004) explains that the process, in which the individual is positioning herself within a gender discourse, and the alteration of the discourse itself, is inherently a matter of identifying and interpreting these gender positions. Gender and violence is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Gender is not the only relevant identity for this thesis. People's construction of their self also encompasses other collective and temporary identities: notions of being 'abused' (victim/survivor); being an 'abuser'; being a 'mother'; being a 'supporter'. These cultural narratives are often gender specific, and linked to different expectations, rights, and practices.

## Emotions and discourses

Research on emotions and bodily experiences has been treated as separate from discourses and cognition, and thereby left the relationship between discourses, emotions, and meaning making largely unexplored (Wetherell, 2012). Nevertheless, the links between emotions, cognition and discourses are crucial in this thesis because ending violence is an emotionally charged experience, which affects decision-making (Chapter Three).

There are different opinions as to what degree emotions are constructed, culturally specific or universal (Turner & Stets, 2005; Thoits, 1989). I follow social theorists who separate the physical response linked to emotions, and the culturally constructed labels and interpretations of what these mean (Hochschild, 1985; Thoits, 1989; Turner & Stets, 2005). One theoretical approach employed here explores the different ways emotions emerge from, and are part of social interaction. From this perspective, emotions are linked to social structure, power, and interpersonal control (Barbalet, 2001; Goffman, 1986; Hochschild, 1985; Scheff, 1990; Thoits, 1989); are performed as part of identities (Goffman 1990); emerge within social practices; and are a form of communication (Potter, 2012; Wetherell, 2012).

The meaning of emotions varies across cultures, and undergoes historical and cultural changes (Thoits, 1989). One historically dominant 'emotion discourse' has distinguished between emotions and rationality - emotions being deemed irrational and the opposite of cognition, which stands for what is rational (Barbalet, 1996; Edwards, 1997; Turner & Stets, 2005).

Contemporary social theory tends to argue that emotions, cognition and rationality are tightly intertwined (Turner & Stets, 2005). Some argue that emotions are evoked by cognition, that the cognitive element comes first, and the physical response and emotional experience second. Others suggest that emotions are providing the basis for cognition (Turner & Stets, 2005). For example, Barbalet (1996) proposed that whilst the future can never be calculated without any real evidence for what may happen, confidence, trust, and loyalty are emotional forms of rationality that operate below the threshold for what can be known. Confidence is, according to Barbalet, the basis for agency and action. No matter what comes first - cognition or emotions - it is clear that thinking influences the ways we feel, and feelings influence the way we think (Turner & Stets, 2005). Thinking and emotions are thus two aspects of the same processes, and must inevitably reflect and accommodate each other. Discourses, as the building blocks for what is known about the world, social organisation and power, must then also involve emotional processes (Wetherell, 2012). Drawing on this approach, feminist researchers have treated emotions - anger, sadness - not as 'chaos', but indicative of an underlying social problem (Lutz, 1990).

The link between discourses and emotions is thus understood as twofold: there are shifting discourses on the nature and categorisation of emotions (Edwards, 1999); and discourses and their practices can evoke and alter emotions' physical representation and experience (Wetherell, 2012). Based on these theoretical foundations, three points can be made. First, discourses constitute ideas, guidelines, and rules about the meaning of emotions: how people should feel in different situations (often gender specific), how they should feel about how they feel, and what actions should follow specific emotions (Hochschild, 1985; Summer-Effler, 2002<sup>1</sup>). Emotions are linked to identity and gender through the idea that emotions and the lack of them tell something about a person's character; and a person's identity/gender regulates the display of emotions (Hochschild, 1985; Lutz, 1990; Goffman, 1990). Showing anger and aggression has for example been more accepted for men than for women, who are expected to show more empathy (Hochschild, 1985).

Second, the meaning of emotions can be reinterpreted in different ways depending on what discursive resources are applied, which can change the experience of, and the emotions themselves (Summers-Effler, 2002). The feeling linked to love within a romantic discourse can be approached as a desired and powerful force, but in a context of violence can be viewed as a form of control. Emotions can consciously be altered through reinterpretation of reality. To

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1. Whilst emotion researchers referred to here often use 'ideology' to explain emotions in interaction with the organisation of knowledge and action, I keep to the concept of discourses. This does not mean that ideology and discourses are treated as the same thing (Mills 2004), but they both constitute *ideas* about behaviours, identities and feelings.

reduce the discrepancy between emotions and actions, and to meet rules on how one ought to, or wants to feel (feeling-rules), some researchers theorise how emotions can be performed, evoked and suppressed. Hochschild (1979), Thoits (1986) and Olicker (1989) have explored how people try to change how they feel internally, which can support individual goals and aims, contribute to conformity, or challenge discursive power (Layder, 2004). Common techniques are cognitive images or frame changing - the concentration on particular things or specific scenarios - which appropriate and realise desired emotions and goals, whilst keeping others at bay (Hochschild, 1979; Olicker 1989; Thoits, 1986, 1986).

Third, discourses *on* emotions are used in communication to explain behaviour, and as a form of persuasion (Potter, 2012; Edwards, 1999). Discursive psychology studies have explored how people use discourses about the nature of emotions strategically in conversations to account for decisions, identities, behaviour; to evoke emotions and/or actions in others (see for example Clare et al 2014; Edwards, 1999; Potter, 2012), or to negotiate power (Lutz, 1990). Clare et al (2014) found that, in order to avoid pity and criticism, asylum seekers use cultural narratives to position themselves as strong. This may be a successful strategy to avoid blame, but will, at the same time, conceal feelings of vulnerability and need.

Taken together, knowledge about the world, identities, behaviour, and emotions are all organised around culturally specific principles.

## **Power and Discourses**

Discourses are, in different ways, linked to power. Discourses can be reproduced by anyone, although everyone may not benefit from them (Weedon, 1997). For Foucault (1980), power is everywhere and manifests as a *persuasive* social phenomenon in relations; as knowledge and "truths" embodied and manifested as formal practices, institutions, rules, and laws (Foucault, 1980). Here, power is implicit and explicit within relationships and social practices, a form of *influence* on someone/something, an *effect*, or a *change*: power can also be the *preservation* of the status quo. From this wide definition of power, three specific links between discourses and power are relevant for the chapters in this thesis: discourses as excluding/including knowledge; discourses as shaping action and practice; discourses as giving shape to and supporting institutional practices.

## **Inclusion/exclusion of knowledge**

Discourses are powerful because they create a condition in which some ways of perceiving the world appear to be "right"; and some places, people, and actions are perceived as "real" (Gee, 2005); and the reason why some facts appear to be common sense (Weedon, 1997). In this way, discourses as the 'recognition', acceptance, and enactment of knowledge prioritise certain

knowledges and exclude others. Foucault (1980:131), therefore, argues that what seems to be the “truth” is not a pure reality but a discursive construct that holds power. Different truths compete; a widely accepted truth is therefore an achievement, a result of effort and power struggle. What is treated as common sense is the most dominant discourse, which has most influence on the individual, because it is least likely to be questioned (Gavey, 1989). Feminists using a discursive perspective have explored how the uncertainty and ambiguity in language is also what makes social and personal change possible (Weedon, 1989). Weedon (1997:76) argues that 'the meaning of experience is perhaps the most crucial site of political struggle over meaning, since it involves personal, psychic and emotional investments on the part of the individual'. Feminist reinterpretations and re-conceptualisations of women's experiences of violence have been a way of creating other truths, which challenge 'common sense' knowledge about gender and violence (Chapter Three).

### Shaping actions

Discourses validate certain ways of doing things and exclude others (Parker, 1993; Weedon, 1997). The power of discursive constructs is thus in the actions and practice(s) enforced. In turn, what people do and say - their practices - changes the meaning of discourses and becomes part of new discursive tools, involving different practices (Hacking, 2000; Connell, 2009; Weedon, 1997). There are many examples of how discursive knowledge shape routine actions. Discourses about love and relationships constitute particular practices such as marriage or moving in together (Mills, 2004), which can result in not living together/being married being seen as a less serious forms of relationship. Similarly, there are specific informal and formal practices to deal with abuse and violence. Weedon (1997) links the way a woman responds to domestic violence to the way she interprets her experiences. A woman's beliefs about violence, ideas about 'masculinity', and the partner's prospects of change guide meaning-making and subsequent actions (Chapter Three).

Guilt and shame are the emotions most commonly linked to control of actions and behaviour (Barbalet, 2001; Goffman, 1990; Hochschild, 1985; Scheff, 1990). Misheva (2000) proposes that shame threatens the core of the self, what one feels about oneself as a human being. Guilt, on the other hand, arises in a role conflict, when two roles contradict each other, whether this is a moral conflict or not. As discussed above behind notions of identity, and being a good human, are discourses produced and reproduced in social interaction, which explicates the links between discourses and shame/guilt. Such emotions are evoked by social evaluation, role-changing, and meaning-making in social situations (Goffman, 1986) in which the individual compares behaviours and emotions with whatever dominant discourses are central in an individual's life (Misheva, 2000). Actions or emotions that do not correspond to a person's self-identity can cause suffering, feelings of shame and guilt (Turner & Set, 2005). Usually, this triggers attempts

to make things right again by apologising, making amends, and other behavioural modifications. Feelings of shame and guilt have thereby a controlling element through encouraging conformity to norms (Scheff, 1990). An alternative is to reinterpret the meaning of an emotion, and/or change the social norm which created it. Layder (2004) argues that it is possible to escape discursive power by identifying and learning how to control emotion-rules linked to a discourse.

## Expert knowledge versus experiential knowledge

A community has the power to accept or reject particular knowledge, which determines its impact (Foucault, 1980). Although anyone can employ knowledge, the effect is most powerful if uttered by an expert, and when accepted as a “truth” within an institution/community, because it is then linked to formal practices and has institutional force (Foucault, 1980). On the other hand, Weedon (1997) argues that institutional practices are executed by individual people who are appropriating laws and regulations through their understanding of these rules. For example, the jury member and the judge use their discursive assumptions about femininity and masculinity in a rape case, and subsequently their understandings of 'provocation' as mitigating the crime (Weedon, 1997:35). In turn, an advocate working to end violence against women may help to change the definition of violence to include behaviours beyond what is currently defined as a crime (Chapter Three).

In contrast, historically, self-help groups in western societies have been grounded in people's right to define their own situation and experience of a common problem, independent of professional labels (Katz, 1979). This does not mean that mutual support is treated as the lack of expertise. Rather, the dominant discourse on knowledge within these groups has been that the 'truth based on personal experience with a phenomenon' is the more valid form of knowledge (Borkman, 1976:446). 'Experiential knowledge' is described as a pragmatic, holistic form of knowledge that is focused on the here and now. Support is organised around a mixture between new and older members, who have developed different levels of expertise around a shared problem (Borkman, 1999).

Taken together, power is within social relations, temporarily held amongst those who are given the right to define the meaning and purpose of these relations (Weedon, 1997). This means that power can be both oppressive and supportive depending on who is benefiting from it.

Individuals exercise agency by understanding experience through discourses, as well as altering their social reality by adopting, resisting and modifying subject positions, and their linked practices. By approaching knowledge and “truths” as discursive constructions, this thesis will explore how women using the forum are influenced by, and use collective identities of people, gender, emotions, and violence to negotiate the meaning of their experiences, rights and expectations.

## Reflexive Work and Experience

What, then, motivates people to reflect on the nature of things, shift positions between discourses, question these positions, and ultimately alter them? The answer which is central to this thesis is that reflexive work and change are prompted by experience of discursive conflicts (Gauntlett, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Mills, 2004; Weedon, 1997), manifested as dissatisfaction in life, feelings of injustice (Gauntlett, 2008; Smith, 1992; Weedon, 1997), and conflicting emotions (Summers-Effler, 2002). Discourses in conflict are contestations between value systems, practices, identities (Mills, 2004). Discursive conflicts are not the same as social conflicts between people, even if they often coexist. Rather, the same person is likely to successfully negotiate several systems of knowledge, identity and ethics (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), but sometimes these discourses can create significant conflicts and crisis (Giddens, 1991; Mills, 2004). Such conflicts may be a result of, amongst other things, increased opportunity for identity formation based on external influences from support groups, social networks, media, political movements, the law, research (Gauntlett, 2008) or life experiences (Niederhoffer & Penne-Baker, 2009).

### Reflexive work as 'life-politics'

According to Giddens, the self is 'governed' through the individual's 'self-reflexive' practices. The construction of the self in modernity shifts within often conflicting possibilities and identities (Goffman, 1990). This prompts ongoing reflexive work to construct a narrative which can account for changing identities and life choices. The goal is to create coherence between past experiences and choices, between future goals and directions.

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self (Giddens, 1991:54).

Thus, reflexive work is triggered by needs for coherence, to remove existential doubts, and to obtain a basic sense of safety: 'ontological security' (1991). What this basic need can achieve is the perception that the body is positioned in a structure - routines, habits and regulated activities - that carries on over time. The more 'life choices' and conflicting discourses an individual is subjected to, the more reflexivity - revising, re-evaluating, repositioning - must she pursue to preserve a coherent narrative (Giddens, 1991). Central to Giddens' concept of self-reflexivity is morality. As modern life offers many conflicting forms of morality, self-reflexivity deals with the lack of moral direction 'modernity has institutionally excluded' (Giddens, 1991:9). Reflexivity, thus, is the 'politics' of identity. By politics, Giddens means the meaning-making

that becomes the basis of decision-making and settles conflicts that arise through conflicting interests and moral directions. Whilst Giddens focuses on the complexity of the post-modern condition as the cause of incoherence and conflicts, reflexivity as a concept is used in this thesis to understand the ethical and emotional conflicts caused by violence (Chapter Three).

Equally, research on how people cope with crisis, including experiences of violence, shows that they engage in reflexivity to find coherence in traumatic experiences (Herman, 1994; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009). Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2009) discuss the need to make sense, and create a coherent story, of traumatic events, and underscore the benefits of doing it in writing. Making the incoherence and the lack of meaning that is often part and parcel of traumatic experiences comprehensible for others is a way to reconnect socially. However, failure to find meaning can lead to circular contemplation, shame, guilt, doubt and depression (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009). Sharing the internal dialogue, the contemplation of identity and internal turmoil that reflexivity may entail in a crisis, is in many different settings a common practice.

#### *Reflexive work with others*

Feminists have used ‘confessional discourse’ to make private experiences public (Mills, 2004). The purpose in these settings has been to remove blame from the individual by locating experience, problems, and feelings within structural processes and injustice (Mills, 2004; Weedon, 1996). Thereby, reformulating and identifying the meaning of emotions can become a political tool with which to criticise something in the social environment (Lutz, 1990; Summers-Effler, 2002). Summers-Effler (2002) uses the example of women who are developing a feminist perspective together. Emotions such as anger, annoyance, humiliation and shame, when shared, become attached to collective identities rather than the self. This allows a necessary distance from such emotions to enable reflection and acceptance of difficult feelings as being normal in the context of inequality and injustice. Through such awareness, people can use their creativity to develop new discourses and names for emotions that better correspond to their new perspective (Summers-Effler, 2002:50).

One example of such gatherings is consciousness raising groups that can be traced back to their emergence in the 1970s Women’s Liberation Movements. Women met to talk about life in a different way, raise awareness about their personal lives and about women’s position more broadly, as well as strengthen friendships and solidarity between women (Norman, 1979). When experience becomes part of a less dominant discourse, it can create enough space to resist other dominant discourses (Weedon, 1997), and may subsequently alter them (Mills, 2004). The lack of representations of women's experiences in public discourse has, for instance, prompted a feminist sociology through reflexive practice (Smith, 1978). Subsequently, the women's movement has created more opportunities for women, but also more conflicting discourses of

how to be a woman. This explicates the links between confession of experiences, and the emergence of new discourses, identities and practices. Discursive conflicts are thus both the possibility for change, and the cause of personal crisis. Naming and bringing meaning to such conflicts, and limiting the conflict itself, can be a way to gain agency. In this process discourses are accepted, challenged and altered.

### Agency and action within a shared practice

Reflexive work is a common feature in all mutual support groups: people coming together who are anxious to connect with others in similar situations and share difficulties (Powell & Perron, 2010). This form of participatory support can create a sense of empowerment and 'self-appraisal' (Powell & Perron, 2010). Support-groups for women who have been abused are set up by domestic violence organisations to provide a space for women to 'come together' and to discuss violence, their current situation and future goals-'a process, by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs' (Rappaport, 1987:122). Loseke (2003) argues that support groups and self-help are employed to reduce the conflicting and chaotic realities abused women often experience.

To explicate how reflexive practices in support groups both facilitate and establish the limits for agency and action, Giddens' concept of practice is employed here. Social discursive practices have been explored by many authors (see for example Foucault, 2002; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984) to bridge the division often made in theory between the individual and social systems (dualism). When using concepts of practice, power is situated in human activity rather than treated as an external "thing". This is useful for showing how the individual is both altering and supporting structure within practices and relationships (Layder, 2005). For Giddens, structure and practice is the same thing. Although Foucault's theory of discursive practice and Giddens' theory of social practice have many similarities, the latter is more developed around the individuals' agency, motives, and interaction with others.

A social practice can be defined as an 'ongoing series of practical activities' (Giddens, 1984:81). This refers to recurrent actions and procedures aimed to obtain particular goals through regular means, which are more or less stable over time. The application of this definition can be wide, but the core has to do with regularities of human behaviour, whether these regularities are criminal, harmful, supportive, or empowering. Each person has multiple positions within many social practices, and there are different types of social practices, including institutions (Giddens, 1984). The most important features of social practices are discursive rules and regulations, and this is where Giddens' social practice and Foucault's discourse theory meet. These rules help to formulate identities, rights and obligations of the individual. To explain how people preserve social regularities over time Giddens (1984) relies on Goffman's (1986) concept of 'frame'. A

frame is a form of scheme, a cluster of rules that helps to organise social activity, defines situations as particular activities, and what people are expected to do (Giddens, 1984). When knowing the 'key' to a social situation - what an activity or a situation is about - the right set of rules and scripts can be derived and appropriated.

However, individuals do not just unconsciously apply these rules. For Giddens, everyone who acts has the power and the ability to influence others (Giddens, 1984). Giddens (1984:14) defines the individual's agency as the ability to intervene - 'to act otherwise' means to be able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention. The double-sided nature of agency is thus to conform to rules and benefit from the entitlement inherent within these rules; and, at the same time, alter the rules when diverting and reformulating practices according to individual history and knowledge.

In a similar vein, research and theory on mutual support groups have depicted mutual support as being organised around shared normative frameworks, rules and values. Such a framework involves a "truth" about a common problem that also constitutes a specific practice and framework for change (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). At the centre of support-processes are collective identities-different narratives around an identity a person can adopt to understand her expectations and rights, if only temporarily (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). Adopting such identities is, according to Loseke (2000:121), a form of "deprivatization" of personal troubles and the institutionalisation of selves we live by'. In other words, the individual problem is removed from the intimate private sphere to become shared with others.

Embarrassment and stigma are the most common reasons why people seek help in support groups, including online forums (Davison et al, 2000). Here, the common discursive tools are used to define and reformulate the contrasts between what is normative and what is not normative, and navigate the individuals' position. In turn, with cognitive and emotional techniques emotions and behaviour can be managed so as to fit into the normative discourse. Alternatively, support groups may seek to remove stigma by reformulating what is perceived as normative so as to mitigate some of the negative feelings of shame or stigma (Thoits, 1986).

To summarise, sharing experiences, identities and discursive 'truths' with others is a way, for those who are participating, of exercising power (agency) and gaining confidence in decisions. Within mutual support groups, members develop a shared practice that favours specific identities and actions over others. This is the power of mutual support and shared practice.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical framework adopted in this thesis makes it possible to explore how individuals interpret experience through discourses, negotiate power between different positions, develop

shared knowledge on how to end violence, and thereby exclude other knowledge and positions. Power is here not necessarily something oppressive, but it is viewed as what enables individuals to act and reach goals. The forum is employed as a platform to formulate the 'keys' for unlocking experiences of violence and shaping a practice of dealing with it. A shared practice involves knowledge, identities, rights and expectations, and entitlement to particular actions, and feelings. The individual is, however, not simply adopting existing collective narratives but she negotiates them, and gives meaning to concepts through experience and on the basis of the interaction with other members. The forum is a social reality in which the individual members can influence and be influenced. The empirical chapters will explore how such reflexive work empowers the individual to act whilst simultaneously limiting what can be pursued within the practice.

## **Chapter Three: Domestic violence and the role of informal support**

A number of fields are relevant for understanding the role of online support for abused women. They include research on domestic violence as a gendered crime and how informal support and people's responses interact with women's actions and responses to violence. Domestic violence is understood through a theoretical framework in which a number of processes shape violence and help-seeking. Among these are emotional-cognitive processes and wider societal discourses, including gender. In addition, research on online mutual support groups will be discussed and their potential for supporting women's efforts to end violence in their lives. The chapter is divided in three parts: domestic violence as a gendered crime; social support theory and research on help-seeking; and mutual support on the internet.

### **Part one: Domestic violence as a gendered crime**

This section addresses definitions/terminology, statistics, and theories on domestic violence/abuse. Violence against women and girls takes many forms and is perpetrated in different social spaces: within families, communities and institutions. It includes physical and sexual assault, harassment, trafficking, and different forms of the commercialisation of women's bodies (O'Toole, 2007). The study of gender violence was triggered by the recognition of the disproportional violence and abuse perpetrated by men against women. From this starting point researchers have investigated the links between gender and use of violence: both frequency of use and how violence is perpetrated (Harne & Radford, 2008). In this thesis 'gender violence' refers to 'violence involving men and women, in which the female is usually the victim and which arises from unequal power relations between men and women' (Harne & Radford, 2008:17). Whilst forms of gendered violence overlap and coexist (Kelly, 1988), the focus in this thesis is 'domestic violence/abuse' within intimate relationships perpetrated by men against women (Hall, 2011; Lundgren, 2002; Martinez & Schrötle, 2006).

#### **Terminology and Definitions**

The terminology used shapes the approach taken (Klein 2013). There have been ongoing debates on what is the best term to describe this form of gender violence. Some of the terms used are listed by Hearn (2013:158): "domestic violence", 'family violence', 'conjugal violence', 'intimate violence', 'partner violence', 'intimate partner violence', 'spousal violence', 'women abuse', 'abusive relationships', 'wife battering', 'wife beating', 'violence against wives', 'violence against known women' and 'coercive control'. The challenges have been to be *inclusive* enough, indicating the range of acts whilst at the same time specifying where it

most often happens and who it happens to. None of the names above achieves all this but the term domestic violence reveals a practice mainly perpetrated in the private sphere, and can capture a complex pattern of behaviour, but has limitations. 'Domestic violence' as a term has been criticised by feminist researchers for not clearly specifying: the involvement of children; the asymmetry of violence between genders; how violence between partners is also often perpetrated outside the home; and for not showing that violence and abuse often continue after that the relationship ends (Mullender, 1996). In addition, whilst most understand 'domestic violence' to encompass both physical acts often referred to as 'violence' and non-physical acts often named as 'abuse', some have argued that it may hide emotional abuse (Kirkwood, 1993) and coercive control (Stark, 2007). This is concerning considering that the non-physical elements may be more prominent in women's experiences (Kirkwood, 1993). In contrast, 'domestic *abuse*' more clearly points to the fact that domestic violence is not always physical, and does not always lead to physical injuries (Kirkwood, 1993). However, the term 'abuse' may have the opposite effect, a 'minimisation' of the risks and consequences involved (Wilcox, 2006:5). Both arguments are valid and each term foregrounds different aspects of 'domestic violence'.

In this thesis 'domestic *violence*' rather than 'domestic *abuse*' is used for two reasons. I argue, with others (Wilcox, 2006; Radford, 2006), that it is important to continue to stress the potential fatal consequences of physical violence. Secondly, domestic violence is the concept used by the forum host, and therefore, it is the most likely to be used by forum members. Thus, it is the core concept in the thesis, covering violence and abuse perpetrated by men against women within an intimate adult relationship - married/non-married, separated/divorced, partners living in shared or separated households, including the involvement of children. When referring to specific acts and processes of violation, I employ the most descriptive term for the particular context, including hitting, control, sexual coercion, and threat. Sometimes I simply refer to 'violence and abuse' and thereby including all forms of harmful acts identified under the umbrella term 'domestic violence'.

#### *Defining domestic violence*

Whilst legislation on domestic violence has focused on physical violence (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Walby & Allen, 2004), academic research has developed from a number of sometimes 'overlapping standpoints' involving both practitioners and researchers (Hearn & McKie, 2008). Some of the debates have evolved around two conceptualisations of 'violence' (Dobash and Dobash, 1998:4): a narrow view of violence as instrumental 'force', physical acts and assaults used intentionally to hurt someone, and a broader view of violence as 'violation' of someone's freedom or rights, a social process of control and power (Bufacchi, 2005). Both conceptualisations have advantages and disadvantages (Dobash & Dobash, 1998), but I will

argue that a broader, more inclusive definition is preferable. Moreover, the definition of domestic violence often implies a political position (Wilcox, 2006), illustrated in the division between 'family conflict' researchers and politicians who frame domestic violence as a harmful practice and feminist researchers who see domestic violence as a political and social problem'.

In the criminal justice system of England and Wales domestic violence is not a specific crime category. The potential for criminalisation is in general categories: 'criminal damage', 'common assault'; 'wounding'; 'harassment'; 'rape' and 'sexual assault' (Walby & Allen, 2004). Non-sexual violence is likely to be categorised as 'common assault' if there is little physical evidence of force, or 'actual bodily harm' if there are visible injuries. It is, however, unlikely that emotional abuse, financial abuse or threats (with the exception of threats to kill) would be included as criminal acts (Walby & Allen, 2004:44). It follows, therefore, that criminal justice system intervention tends to focus on recent incidents of physical assault which result in injuries.

Accordingly, the narrow definition of violence emphasises that in order for an act to be 'violence' it must be non-consensual and deliberate (Mason 2002). For example, the criminologist Gail Mason (2002:5) defines violence as 'the exercise of physical force by one person/s upon the body of another. By physical force, I mean, pushing, shoving, hitting, punching, or otherwise harming or hurting the person who is targeted; which in turn often produces emotional and psychological harm'. Also, family conflict researchers have predominantly focused on a narrower definition of violence as 'force' to encompass criminal acts (Straus, 1999). The presumed advantage of reserving the term 'violence' for physical assaults is clarity: the possibility to indicate the exact nature and extent of an assault, which facilitates measurement and comparison; and to be able to clearly distinguish the criminal elements of violence. That the definition of domestic violence should be so objective and straightforward has, however, been disputed (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Dobash and Dobash (2004) argue that the meaning of 'force' depends on the context: objects involved (a soft objects or one more capable of causing harm); how this is experienced by the recipient of violence; and the outcome (obedience, injury, laughter, or more severe retaliation). Moreover, approaching violence as physical assault is also partly responsible for overlooking interrelated non-physical elements of abuse (Mullender, 1996; Wilcox, 2006), and hides how the use of violence and abuse is gendered and tightly linked to power (Hearn, 2013). This problem has been addressed by feminist researchers.

The broader, more inclusive definition preferred for this thesis was developed by feminist researchers and practitioners through women's accounts of violence and abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Haaken, 2010). Within this perspective, it is stressed that to encompass women's lived experiences, definition(s) of violence must include actions that are criminalised and those

that are not (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Kelly & Radford, 1990; Stark, 2007; Wilcox, 2006). Feminist definitions of violence therefore include under the umbrella term ‘domestic violence’ an extensive range of non-physical acts (for example threats, name-calling, and humiliation) within new concepts (emotional/psychological violence, coercive control). In this way, feminists have constructed a new framework for defining and understanding domestic violence (Hearn, 2013), which recognises that women may experience non-physical malicious acts as harmful as physical attacks (Kirkwood, 1993); and which highlights the links between violence, power, and control (Hearn, 2013; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 2007). Domestic violence is understood as an ongoing ‘pattern of coercive behaviour’, (Hearn, 2013:159) combining both ‘force’ and ‘violation’ (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Hearn, 1998) and grounded in gendered practices (Hearn, 1998; Lundgren, 1998). The focus here is on how acts of violence and abuse are interrelated, have specific meanings and cumulative consequences.

However, defining domestic violence as a multitude of repeated acts, a pattern, creates challenges of identifying such a pattern, and how to deal with a single harmful act. Dobash and Dobash (2004) point out the problems of subsuming a great variety of acts and utterances under new categories of ‘abuse’ outside their interpersonal or social context. Locating too many acts within the same concept weakens it, and hides their differences. Dobash and Dobash (2004) use the example of ‘made threats to leave’ which is part of a scale of ‘psychological abuse’. Whether this can be defined as abuse, or is perceived as abuse by the recipient and the perpetrator, cannot be known without exploring the context in which such a comment was made. Concerns have also been raised as to whether such definitions are understood and accepted by perpetrators and victims of abuse (Walby & Allen, 2004). In the British Crime Survey<sup>2</sup> which measured experiences of domestic violence, harassment, and sexual violence of 22,463 female and male participants, only two thirds of the female victims recognised that being subjected to acts that do not count as a crime is not the same as not being abused: physical assaults that caused visible injuries were most likely to be interpreted as domestic violence (Walby & Allen, 2004). This could be a consequence of that new conceptualisations are less well-known in public discourse (Wilcox, 2008). It could also be that such definitions are too abstract (Dobash & Dobash, 2004) and difficult to measure empirically (Hearn, 2013). However, this is an issue for all analytic concepts and the reason why researchers use behavioural descriptions rather than the terms violence or abuse.

In sum, the first approach defines violence through a legal discourse, guided by which actions count as a crime. The second, feminist, perspective has been guided by the concept of violence as force *and* violation, and what women have reported as being harmful. An optimal definition

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2. The authors Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen pointed out that, although the survey was a Home Office production, the views in the report represented the authors not the Home Office or governmental policy.

of domestic violence would construct a meaning of violence wide enough to reflect women's experiences (Kelly & Radford, 1990); specific enough to measure violence/abuse across different studies (Mason, 2002); flexible enough to give space for the situated meanings of acts in specific contexts (Dobash & Dobash, 1998); and theoretically grounded so that gendered practices and violations are embedded in the definition (Hearn, 2013; Hearn & McKie, 2008). The aim of this study, however, is not to measure violence but to investigate support processes in an online forum. Thus, one of the research tasks is to understand and investigate members' concepts of violence and abuse, and then contextualise these findings within domestic violence theory.

#### *Current policy based definitions*

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (2011:8, Article 3) explicates (a) a definition of violence against women and (b) a definition of the specific context of domestic violence.

a) violence against women” is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life

b) “domestic violence” shall mean all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim;

These definitions combine acts of 'force', and 'violations', and include the private and public nature of violence. However, the perpetrator is invisible. In contrast, the definition provided by the United Nations' (1996) more clearly points to the meaning of *gendered*, as being male violence towards women:

Woman-battering or domestic assault is the most common form of domestic violence, characterized by the use of physical or psychological force, or the threat of such force, by the dominant domestic partner, whilst recognizing the overwhelming probability that this partner is male, for the purpose of intimidating, manipulating or coercing the subordinate partner. (UN, 1996)

This definition above includes the *purpose* of using violence: 'intimidating', 'manipulating', or 'coercing' the victim.

The definitions outlined here encompass elements of violence previously discussed: gendered processes, force (physical assaults, other verbal or non-verbal acts) and violations of liberty.

I also add one more descriptive definition by Hearn (2013) of what *counts* within a coercive pattern of violence.

What counts as violence or violation involves previous and potential violences, assumed or actual threat and intimidations, violence embedded in social relations, processes of accumulation of violations over time, and various psychological, emotional, verbal and subtle violations and controls, feelings of fear, degradations, intimidations, humiliations, isolations, entrapments, virtual or actual imprisonments, and the sense of people, surroundings and events being uncomfortable and out of control. (Hearn, 2013:159).

Whilst this is undoubtedly a more accurate description of domestic violence as it is lived, it is not a definition which can be easily adapted to categories in survey research or embedded in policy framings.

## Gender and domestic violence/abuse

What is it, then, that makes domestic violence gendered? Research reveals that the use of violence and abuse differs in both proportion, and the specific practices and motivations to use violence across gender. In this section, the statistical evidence, and theoretical explanations for approaching violence is discussed from a gender perspective.

### *Evidence of domestic violence as a gendered crime*

Domestic violence has been measured from many angles. Recent data suggest that only one in three women who experienced violence from a partner reports it to the police or other support agencies (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, FRA, 2014). Some do not report violence due to fear or shame; others may not define their experiences as violence (Harne and Radford 2008). The focus here is on the academic debate and disagreement around the magnitude and nature of domestic violence from researchers who have found hugely different rates of domestic violence across gender (Buzawa et al., 2011; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Straus, 1999; Kimmel, 2002).

Reports from family conflict researchers have shown that within marriage or couple relationships women are just as likely to use violence as men (Dutton et al, 2010; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998; Moffitt et al, 2001). Using a 'conflict tactic scale' (Straus et al, 1996), all recent incidents of physical violence assaults and acts of aggression are included, whether they were perceived as minor, rare single incidents, or part of a repeated pattern of violence (Straus, 1999). The rationale for this act-based approach is that an assault is an assault independently of harm caused (Straus, 1999). Results from such measurements indicate that domestic violence is a symmetrical problem, equally perpetrated by men and women, and must be solved by looking at violence as a two-sided relational and reciprocal conflict between those involved (Straus, 1999). In turn, violence against women researchers respond that counting assaults fails to acknowledge

the different motivations of men and women who use violence in relationships (Kimmel, 2002; Pence & Paymar, 1993). In addition, when measuring acts as separate incidents the damage of the combination of acts, and the accumulated effects of what may be written off as minor incidents is ignored (Harne & Radford, 2008; Stark, 2007). Feminists have explored the context of specific acts of violence, including intention, motivation and outcome (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). With such an approach, the feminist perspective has found an asymmetrical pattern of violence in regard to violent practices, frequency of victimisation, and impacts.

When measuring acts that are perceived by the receiver as damaging and threatening, men are more often perpetrators and women more often victims (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hester, 2009; Johnson, 2006, 2011; Kimmel, 2002; Lundgren, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2006), and women are more likely to have experienced repeated victimisation and chronic levels of violence and abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Moreover, men and women's violent practices differ in intention and type of violence used (Johnson, 2006, 2011; Kimmel, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2006). For example, Hester (2009) found that women use violence mainly in context of men's use of violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Swan & Snow, 2006), to defend themselves or their children (Hester, 2009). Women are also more likely to use weapons to protect themselves (Hester, 2009). This was in contrast to men, who were motivated to use violence to gain power and control, and often paired their use of physical violence with threats and harassment to gain such an effect (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hester, 2009; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 2007). Both men and women use violence for retribution. However, men more often seek retribution for imagined wrong-doings, such as an imagined affair, or for what is perceived as being bad behaviour, whereas women often seek retribution for men's use of violence (Kimmel, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2006).

Moreover, both family conflict researchers and feminist researchers recognise that women are more likely to be injured than men, and the psychological consequences for women are worse (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Straus, 1999). The consequences of violence for women must also be analysed in relation to the common motivation amongst men to gain control. Researchers have found that women experience decreased freedom and 'space for action' (see next section) (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kelly & Westmarland, 2013; Lundgren, 2002; Stark, 2004).

Furthermore, the different results between feminist researchers and family violence researchers may be partly a result of the measurement of different types of violences. Both Stark (2007) and Johnson (2006) distinguish between 'fights' and 'situational couple violence' that most couples have, which are attempts to increase equality and understanding rather than decrease it; and 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007)/intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2006) whereby one partner seeks to control the other. Both Johnson and Stark propose that when researchers such as for example

Dutton et al (2010) argue for gender symmetry they draw on measurements of violence only measuring situational couple violence but fail to detect coercive control and intimate terrorism. In turn, researchers arguing for gender asymmetry are drawing from a population of specialised domestic violence surveys that measure gendered violence (coercive control or intimate terrorism; Johnson, 2011). However, Johnson (2006) remarks that not even symmetrical couple violence is completely equal: men have physical advantages and can cause more injuries and fear than women do.

The conclusion drawn by feminist researchers is that domestic violence is part of broader social problems rather than being a consequence of conflict among equals within family dynamics. These arguments suggest that there are undeniable gender differences in use of violence, frequency, motivations behind use, and impacts on the individuals. These can only be understood through a theoretical framework which acknowledges and analyses gender practices and their links to power.

#### *Gender practices and violence*

The basic assumptions behind the study of gendered violence are that men are not biologically more prone to use violence than women, and not all men are violent (Hunnicut, 2011). As pointed out by Hearn (2012), constructions of 'men' and 'women' (Chapter Two), are powerful enough to organise gendered behaviour, including the use of violent practices. Contemporary theory is contested and diverse, but there are a few common features: domestic violence is a result of normative and conflicting gendered practices and forms of masculinity generated from the relationships among men, and between men and women (Hearn, 2012; Hearn & Whitehead, 2006; Lundgren, 1995); violence is a product of, and a means to preserve inequality and power differences between men and women (Connell, 2009; Hearn, 1998; Walby, 1990); gender practices that support violence involve processes of class, sexuality, and other social positions, which change, above all, the consequences of violence for the individual (Richie, 1996; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). The exact link between the use of violence and power, and performances of gender is too complex to fully present here; what follows is a brief summary of key arguments.

In Connell's (2009) model, domestic violence is generated as part of the broader reproduction of gender for both men and women and involves: different processes of power (discursive, institutional); gender differences in labour and consumption; and culture (cultural narratives, romantic desires and ideals). This means that although individual men are the agents who commit violent acts, a recurrent pattern of gendered violence could not be sustained without a supporting structure on an 'economical', 'emotional', and 'cultural' level (Connell, 2009). Connell (2009) separates 'gender order' and 'gender regime': the former referring to the overall structure of a society and the latter to local practices, for example in a school. Single practices

(regimes) can divert from, and challenge dominant gender discourses, but are always somewhat regulated and influenced by the dominant gender order of the society. Within this model, the construct of gender in itself does not need to coexist with inequality and violence (Connell, 2009). It is rather how different masculinities are interpreted, performed and reinforced within an institution, which is the key to understanding the asymmetry in the use of violence.

To begin with, the 'hegemony of men' (Hearn, 2012) - that men are entitled to have more power and advantages than women - is argued to be scripted within cultural ideas about men and women. Such dominant principles entitle individual men to use violence at times when this hegemony has been questioned. Second, men having authority and dominance over women is widely stressed in the culture as a locus for pleasure and status, which further legitimises the instrumental use of violence (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men's emotions, such as anger, feelings of injustice, are guided and evoked by such discourses, which explains why the use of violence appears to be an emotional problem rather than located in values.

Supporting these theories, Stark (2007) showed how the participants in his study used coercive control as a means to implement a domestic gender regime that does not corresponds to the one they are living in - that men are superior to women. In order to re-establish a dominant masculinity the man has to build it himself, if necessary by force. In a similar vein, Lundgren found that when a man abuses a woman he tries to change her to become his version of femininity, which will make him his version of masculinity (Lundgren, 2004). Here, violence has a particular purpose: to set limits to women's choices, and thereby decrease women's 'life-space' (Lundgren, 2004). Once again, the gendered dimension of domestic violence extends from the statistics of who is most commonly perpetrator/victim to how violence is perpetrated.

Moreover, as Hearn (2012) pointed out, 'violence to known women' is achievable, and something is gained when using it. For example, in Dobash and Dobash's (1998) study conflicting interests between partners linked to different positions as mothers, fathers, partners and lovers, result in violent acts men used to remain the one who has the last say and whose needs have highest priority (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Hearn, 1998). However, whilst power is desired, using violence to women is in many contexts everything but honourable, and this reveals many complex conflicting discourses behind the use of violence (Hearn, 2012, 1998), and can explain why men often deny, justify, and minimise it (Hearn, 2012, 1998). Violence towards women is thus not always a sign of status and authority in itself, but the means to preserve a status which is perceived by the user of violence as his right or entitlement (Hearn, 2012; Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

Taken together, the relationship between gender and violence is twofold: the use of violence is a gender practice within relationships; and violence can also be a response to conflicts between

different gender identities. Accordingly, in this thesis domestic violence is treated as a problem entangled with the construction of gender, and the history of power differences between men and women.

## Current conceptualisations of domestic violence

Even though domestic violence can take different forms, it is important to recognise the problems that arise when trying to distinguish between such categories, and how forms of abuse coexist. Liz Kelly (1988) theorises how what is perceived as minor incidents such as name-calling on the streets are linked to the same 'continuum of violence' as what is perceived as serious violent incidences such as rape and beating. In this way the same women experience within a culture a range of different types of violence – illegal as well as normalised forms of violence - in many different places and relations. For example, a recent study found that men's everyday harassment and intrusion on women in public space fundamentally impacts on women's sense of self (Elvines, 2014). By classifying violence as more or less serious forms of violence, the links between these separate but interrelated acts are lost (Kelly, 1988). In a similar vein, recent theorists have moved away from a sharp distinction between child abuse and domestic violence and now favour a more holistic perspective of abuse within the family (Morris, 2008, 2009). This holds for child sexual abuse, child abduction, and physical and emotional abuse against mother and child (Radford, 2006). In developing the concept 'abusive household gender regime', Morris (2009) argues that abuse of mother and child is intertwined with the power structure of the family.

### *Physical violence*

Physical violence or 'force' refers to, for example slapping, pushing, hitting, biting, throwing something, strangling, using weapons (Walby & Allen, 2004), and torture (Stark, 2007). From a feminist perspective, physical violence is used to enforce particular rules and norms in the relationship and thereby reinforce power and control (Johnson, 2006; Lundgren, 2004; Morris, 2009; Smith, 1998; Stark, 2007). Physical violence thus makes up the visible surface of a spectrum of abuse (Harne & Radford, 2008). Some abusive men never directly use physical violence but intimidate in other ways, for example, by destroying objects in the home or by threatening to use violence (Harne & Radford, 2008). Fear and intimidation are hard to measure but can result in what is often described as a feeling of 'walking on eggshells', that is, having to tip-toe around the violent partner trying to avoid anything that could trigger more violence (Stark, 2007). In this way, many women experience violence as constant even when physical assault happens rarely or never (Kirkwood, 1993; Lundgren, 2004; Ptacek, 1999; Smith, 1995; Stark, 2007).

### *Emotional/psychological abuse*

Researchers rarely clearly distinguish between emotional and psychological abuse and here the terms are used interchangeably. This form of abuse can include: threats; degradation; bullying; being called stupid, ugly, inappropriate, and insufficient; being treated as less worthy; threats to commit suicide (Kirkwood, 1993; Stark, 2007; Wilcox, 2006). Thus, emotional/psychological abuse appears to be all abuse that is not a physical or sexual act. Control sometimes overlaps with emotional/psychological abuse. For example, Kirkwood describes emotional abuse as the key dimension of a 'web of abuse', a form of controlling structure that keeps a victim attached to the perpetrator.

Kirkwood (1993) and Wilcox (2006) discuss the emotional components of abuse in depth. Bullying may involve the perpetrator targeting areas of low confidence. Another dimension Kirkwood (1993) terms 'distortion of subjective reality' involves having one's perspective of reality diminished or denied. This can entail the perpetrator denying violent incidents, refusing to acknowledge the pain and suffering that he has inflicted, or making up stories about the victim that she may internalise. Furthermore, gendered expectations of women are included in conceptualisations of emotional/psychological abuse: having the entire responsibility for the relationship and for the children (Kirkwood, 1993); or being responsible for, and looking after their partners' well-being as if they were children (Wilcox, 2006). Failing to live up to these expectations in Wilcox's (2006) study was experienced as the same as failing to live up to expectations linked to self-identity. In addition, Kirkwood (1993) highlights the harms of objectification, to be treated as the perpetrator's sexual object and property. The most devastating and long-term consequences of bullying and 'mind-games' were described as a deep sense of shame and self-hatred (Wilcox, 2006; Kirkwood, 1993). Many women take on responsibility for the abuse by thinking that it was self-induced, which adds to the feelings of shame and guilt (Kirkwood, 1993).

### *Sexual abuse*

Sexual abuse is a frequent form of abuse within intimate relationships (Kelly, 1988), and is therefore described as part of a broader pattern of domestic violence, as a way to intimidate, and exercise power and control (Stark, 2007). Rape is still very much attached to the idea that it is only perpetrated by strangers (Kelly, 1988; McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2011). Sexual abuse can be used as a form of degradation and shaming (Stark, 2007). Moreover, many women who have experienced pressure to have sex do not perceive it as rape, even when it clearly is not consensual, pointing to an undefined grey-zone between current conceptualisations of sexual abuse and non-abuse (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998; Kelly & Radford, 1990). Therefore, Kelly and Radford (1990) argue that the strict distinction between the categorisation sexual abuse/rape and non-abuse does not cover all experiences of coerced and unwanted sex. Many women may

experience many forms of sexual abuse, without having a socially accepted definition to name these experiences, let alone report them.

### *Coercive Control*

Many theorists have focused on specific acts and techniques used to gain control over a partner (Kirkwood, 1993; Lundgren, 2004; Wilcox, 2006). Particularly prominent here is Evan Stark (2007), who argues that domestic violence should be considered a liberty crime: that domestic violence is not only about lack of safety, but equally about reduced freedom. The aim and consequence of controlling behaviour is to limit the victim's choices and possibilities, and thereby construct an 'invisible cage' around a woman's life (Stark, 2007). He illustrates, through case-studies, how perpetrators of coercive control enforce a number of restrictions on a woman's freedom: on what and how to spend money; how to use social media and other technology i.e. phone/computers/cars; what to wear; what to eat; when to use the bathroom; when/if to have sex; when and how to communicate. Moreover, social control, i.e. the control of contact with friends, family, and work (Stark, 2007) creates a vulnerability to a person's sense of self, social confidence and identity. The perpetrator becomes the primary source of information and social recognition. Stark (2007) employs Cornell's (2009) theory of 'the imaginary domain' - an imagined space where a person's relations with other people are played out, new social identities tested, and new role-models applied. Isolation limits the imaginary space and thus the ability to pursue one's goals in life. If a woman is subjected to coercive control, her imaginary space is limited by the abusive partner's influence and perspective of the world (Stark, 2007). Coercive control as theorised by Stark is difficult to detect because it is cunningly built into the context of the relationship in a mixture of both illegal and legal elements. Thus, he explains, that in order to understand a woman's choices and actions in regard to domestic violence, one must first unravel all different areas in her life that are controlled.

### *Normalisation of violence*

A concept that elaborates on the process of victimisation is the 'normalisation process' (Lundgren, 2004). A common reaction to violence is to try to adapt to the abuser's norms and adjust behaviour in order to avoid further violence (Lampert, 1996; Lundgren, 2004). However, the abusive partner's norms are constantly changing, and therefore, it is not possible to stop the violence by adjusting or adapting to his rules. Lundgren (2004) argues that this is a 'normalisation' of violence based on the double standards that already exist between men and women in a heterosexual relationship. Once violence is normalised it provides the abusive partner space to introduce new demands, a development in the relationship that gradually removes a woman's boundaries and it becomes more and more difficult for her to distinguish between normal compromises/arguments in a relationship and abuse (Lundgren, 2004; Stark, 2007). In other words, an act of violence or a restriction is no longer seen as a sanction or

punishment but rather as a normal aspect of the relationship. Lundgren, (1998) suggests that it is the interplay of violence and love that removes a woman's understanding of the boundaries between abuse and non-abuse. 'Internalisation' of violence refers to how through the process of normalisation of violence, the perpetrator's view of the world is gradually adopted, and violence and control eventually become embodied (Lundgren, 2004).

In sum, feminist conceptualisations of domestic violence take a holistic perspective of violence as comprising the whole relationship. This means that being abused is more than incidents within an otherwise more or less good relationship, and forms of violence are gender specific, and part of the gendered relationship. The subtle elements of control and emotional abuse are entangled within gendered expectations, and there are grey areas between legal and illegal actions.

## Ending violence

Extensive research has been carried out to explore the lived experiences of violence, and abused women's strategies to end violence in their lives, including the emotional, social and cognitive processes they are likely to be dealing with. Theorists of domestic violence have debated women's actions and choices (Kirkwood, 1993). Talking about women's efforts to end violence could be read as holding them responsible for violence and for stopping the partner's actions. This is, however, not the intention of this framing here. Abused women do what they can, under the circumstances, to protect themselves and their children and to improve their lives. Whether or not there is social, institutional or legal pressure on violent men to end their violence, it is up to them to actually change and end their violence against the women in their intimate relationships. Thus, the phrase 'ending violence' is used as shorthand for a process in which women try to extricate or free themselves from an abusive man and his influence over their life and that of their children. However, the phrase is not really about the man ending his violence; he may be abusive to the next woman or other people. In addition, it may not entail ending all violence in the woman's life; she may have another abusive partner in the future, or she may have to deal with other violence in her life, from other family members, from other institutions, from unknown men, from warfare/armed conflict, and so on.

### *Agency and actions*

Early researchers tried to understand why victims of domestic violence so often appeared to defend the abuser, and "stayed" in the relationship despite the violence. For a long time, the dominant explanation was based on psychoanalytic theory, suggesting women subconsciously desired the abuse as part of a masochistic/sadistic sexual relationship dynamic (Symonds, 1979). This perspective was criticised as victim-blame by feminist researchers (Kirkwood, 1993). Its successors explained why women stayed through learned helplessness (Walker, 1977).

'Cycles of abuse' - regular comings and goings, build-ups, violent outbreaks, and good periods - taught the women to be passive in relation to violence. Learned helplessness did not blame the women for the abuse but, in line with all criticism of behaviourist theory, it made women passive victims, and gave no credit to the work women did to resist and end violence in their lives (Kirkwood, 1993).

To reflect the ongoing nature of violence many theorists have used metaphors that illustrate how different acts of control and abuse keep the woman in the relationship, for example 'a web of abuse' (Kirkwood, 1993); an 'invisible cage' (Stark, 2007) 'intimate terrorism' (Johnson, 2005); 'social entrapment' (Ptacek, 1999); 'gender entrapment' (Richie, 1995). All these concepts indicate that the woman is in fact not free to leave, and that victims have a limited life space (Lundgren, 2004) in which to make choices and to take action (Westmarland & Kelly, 2013). Based on Eva Lundgren's (2004) notion of decreased life space and normalised violence Liz Kelly (2005) developed the concept of 'space for action' - feeling and being in control of life, to make one's own decisions without fearing abuse. Normalised violence (Lundgren 2004), lack of support, and coercive control (Stark, 2007) leave little room for thinking, planning, and taking action (Kelly, 2005). According to Kelly, the concept of 'agency' can thus be misleading, for example in the context of trafficking, when it focuses on a woman's capacity to act without considering to what extent her context limits or precludes action. The same holds for the context of domestic violence (Westmarland & Kelly, 2013).

An implicit notion within these theories is that victims are rarely able to reach safety from violence and control within the relationship (unless the abuser ceases his violence). In particular, in contexts of coercive control it is argued that there are very few ways a victim can confront the abusive behaviour (Stark, 2007). Instead, researchers explain women's resistance to violence within the relationship as another way to adapt to violence (Enander & Holmberg, 2008), or exercise 'control in the context of no control' (Stark, 2007:216). Playing along with a partner's dictatorial everyday agenda may be a vital survival strategy to avoid more violence, but not to end it, which again illustrates that it is the perpetrator who has the responsibility to end his violence. Stark (2007) describes the importance of spaces and objects less related to the partner to preserve a sense of agency in the context of coercive control: a diary, a dress, a particular friend, something that is connected to a happier time, a more self-affirming identity.

According to these theorists, women's resistance to violence within the relationship plays a greater role in the protection of their selfhood than in ending violence (Enander & Holmberg 2008; Stark 2007). However, even if Stark (2007) has made attempts to explain how women resist violence, and preserve a level of autonomy within the relationship, coercive control has also been criticised for not giving enough credit to women's attempts to end violence (Anderson, 2009). In addition, Lundgren's 'normalisation process' was challenged with the argument that

women never stop questioning violence, and violence is therefore never fully perceived as normal in the relationship (Hydén, 1994). Little research, to date, has focused on ending violence within the relationship, with help of, for example perpetrator/freedom programs. Therefore, women's attempts to end violence in their lives are often conceptualised in terms of 'leaving' or 'escaping' an abusive relationship. Only the perpetrator can end his violence for good. The woman who leaves him may succeed in ending violence in her life, but it is neither her responsibility nor in her power to end his violence; he may be violent to another woman. Within a framing of control and violence researchers ask 'why does she leave?' (Enander & Holmberg, 2008), and how women 'survive' an abusive relationship (Kirkwood, 1993; Richie, 1996; Wilcox, 2006). To challenge constructions of a passive victim recent conceptualisation of how women end violence in their lives focus on the process of 'leaving'.

#### *An emotional-cognitive perspective*

Some of the literature on how women end violence in their lives is focused on emotional-cognitive processes (Lampert, 1996; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Researchers have documented how these processes are informed by discourses which influence directions for action (Baly, 2010; Enander, 2010; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wilcox, 2006). Specific steps and turning-points in the process of ending violence have been identified. The purpose is not to evaluate these findings, but to map out arguments that can bring an understanding to the findings in this thesis. The main reference points here are Enander and Holmberg (2008) and Enander (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011), who explored how cognitive and discursive processes connect with emotional bonds to the abusive partner. Leaving is conceptualised within three overlapping processes: 'break-up' (turning-points); 'becoming free' (breaking emotional bonds); and 'understanding' (defining violence/recognising victimisation) (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). These processes will be briefly outlined below together with other researcher's findings.

#### *Meaning-making processes*

The importance of meaning-making processes for agency was shown in Chapter Two. Meaning-making is equally important in the process of ending violence, and when coping with the long-term consequences of violence (see Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Kelly, 1988; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Kirkwood, 1993; Lampert, 1996; Wilcox, 2006, 2008). Women may 'replay' the violence in their head from the perspective of having been abused, a way to reconstruct events and deal with emotions, including guilt (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Part of the process of understanding may be reassessing the relationship (Lundgren, 2004; Short et al, 2000). Most importantly, understanding involves identifying violence and one's self as abused. Discursive ideas about violence, victims and abusers are in play here. Narrow representations of what a 'real victim' or a 'real perpetrator' is can prevent women from identifying themselves as abused,

and recognising the partner's actions as abusive (Kelly, 1988; Enander and Holmberg, 2008; Wilcox, 2008). Some studies suggest that women leave because they define themselves as abused (Landenburger, 1989), and others that women define themselves as abused after they leave (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). How women who are abused interpret their experiences influences the actions they take: if she perceives that she is abused she is more likely to seek help (Stark, 2007). In addition, women defining themselves as abused can untie the emotional bond of guilt (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Enander, 2010). One of the few researchers who explores the period after violence ends is Kirkwood (1993), who argues that an important part of the process was to turn experience into 'wisdom', which could lead to engagement in activism including raising awareness about domestic violence and volunteering.

### *Emotional processes*

In Chapter Two it was argued that understanding is informed by emotions. Many break-ups are emotional, and ending an abusive relationship is not an exception. Rather, the current literature describes it as particularly emotional. There are also discourses tightly connected to such emotional processes, such as the importance of keeping the relationship/marriage/family together and ideas about ideal femininity/masculinity (Baly, 2010; Towns & Adams, 2000; Enander, 2010; Wilcox, 2006). In Enander and Holmberg's (2008:207) study interviewees revealed how emotions and feelings attached to the partner - 'love', 'fear', 'hate', 'compassion', 'guilt' and 'hope' – had to be untangled as part of the process of ending violence. Women went through the following stages: 'I love him'; 'I hate him'; 'I feel sorry for him'; 'I don't feel anything'. Reluctance to leave may include fear that her partner is going to hurt/kill her if she does (Liang, 2005; Stark, 2007; Wilcox et al, 2000). Other reasons, for example love for partner (Short et al, 2000), and hope that he will change (Enander & Holmberg 2008; Lundgren, 2004) may be reinforced through romantic narratives and belief that love can have a healing effect (Towns & Adams, 2000). In addition, perceived contradictions about the 'true' nature of the partner - the loving and amazing part or the despicable cruel and abusive part - causes 'cognitive dissonance' (Enander, 2011). Leaving means giving up on the good side of the partner, but staying means continuing to endure abuse. To resolve this contradiction, women engage in 'emotion-work': first focusing on the good parts of the partner to rationalise the act of staying; and second, in order to leave, women focused on the abusive part, and in this way ignored the part of him that they still loved (Enander, 2011). A similar process was observed by Eisikovits et al (1998).

When the women were in the stage of hate they often left but then returned to the relationship (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Hate can be linked to ideas about injustice, and the critical observation of someone, or someone's actions as being unacceptable that was part of the process of understanding. In contrast, 'compassion', feeling sorry for the partner, was an emotion that

occurred alongside, and at the same time obstructed attempts to leave the relationship (Enander & Holmberg, 2008:89). Women who perceived the partner as a small child underneath the abuser, removed responsibility from the partner, and made it difficult for them to leave their partner as this could feel like 'abandon a hurt child' (Enander 2010:89). Also after the relationship ends, women typically deal with feelings of anger, fear and depression, and some women struggle to find a space to express anger especially when having children (Kirkwood, 1993). The end of the process of leaving is marked by women not feeling anything towards the partner (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Thus, ending violence is informed by the cessation of some emotions and the emergence of others. These processes will be explored in later chapters.

### *Turning points*

Many researchers have noted a specific moment or time in the course of events that often leads to a separation. The concept of a 'turning point' seeks to symbolise a shift, the point at which women become more determined to end violence and direct their actions more effectively towards this (Chang, 2010). Three categories of turning-points, linked to both emotional and cognitive processes, stand out in the literature.

One category of turning points refers to increased awareness of the risks of violence (Enander & Holmberg, 2008): leaving to protect children's or someone else's safety, or when perceiving that a child has been affected by violence (Campbell et al, 1998; Chang et al 2010; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Kirkwood, 1993); when she perceives that there was a risk that she could kill him; or severe injury (Campbell et al, 1998; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Landenburger, 1989). A second set of turning points is more linked to reevaluating the relationship and giving up attempts to preserve it, including: a sudden shift in how a woman defines actions and utterances as violence, 'views her relationship', and 'herself' (Campbell et al, 1998; Kirkwood, 1993; Patzel, 2001); ceases to love him, or loses hope for future common projects with the partner; loses hope that he will change (Chang et al, 2010; Eisikovits et al, 1998; Landenburger, 1989; Enander & Holmberg, 2008); becomes more aware of personal costs of violence such as loss of self (Eisikovits et al, 1998; Landenburger, 1989); becomes angry (Landenburger, 1989; Short et al, 2000; Wilcox et al, 2000); realises that she cannot stop the violence by changing her own behaviour (Wilcox et al, 2000). These turning points sometimes happen when women recognise their situation in other people's stories, and through media representations (Landenburger, 1989; Wilcox, 2008). The third group of turning-points involved increased possibilities, resources or support (Campbell et al, 1998; Chang et al 2010; Patzel, 2001) and this will be discussed in part two of this chapter.

A combination of lost hope, self-preservation, and critical awareness seems to influence the particular point when a separation happens, although all are interrelated. These turning points are indicative of violence and control, and related to discursive conceptualisations of violence,

identity, relationship and family. Gendered expectations, and lack of identification of violence, may contribute to attempts to preserve the relationship. Finally, the success of attempts to end violence is strongly linked to levels of support.

## Reflections

From a feminist perspective violence is a gendered phenomenon evoked through gendered practices. Women who are abused must thus identify and separate violence and abuse from normalised double-standards in the relationship. Inevitably, then, the process of ending violence constitutes many emotional-cognitive processes (Enander & Holmberg, 2008), which in turn are connected to understandings of gender and violence. Women's choices and actions were found to be influenced by their 'space for action' (Kelly, 2005), as well as shrunken intellectual and cognitive space, i.e. sources of inspiration and material to use when constructing new identities, and when making meaning of experiences in life. Therefore, having 'space' to end violence is interpreted in this thesis as also having access to alternative discourses. Lack of such 'life-space' narrows a person's ability to make choices, adopt identities, have entitlement to act, and build a social network. All studies above explore women's individual meaning making processes from retrospective accounts. Little has been written about how emotional/cognitive processes and turning points are dealt with and talked about in conversation with others in real-time, but this will be addressed in this thesis. In the next section, the role of social networks, available support, socio-economic factors, and the community are explored.

## **Part Two: Social Support and Domestic Violence**

Support to women who have been abused is commonly divided into formal and informal support although they sometimes overlap. Formal support refers to services provided by the state, NGO's and the legal system - police, professional workers, shelters, support workers, and counselling (Kelly et al, 1996). There are shortcomings in services, which may not exist in sufficient number or lack necessary expertise, especially with respect to diverse communities and needs (Coy et al, 2009): this is especially true for black women and ethnic minority groups both in the US (Hadeed & El-bassel, 2006; Short et al, 2000), and the UK (Coy et al, 2009). Many women find state agencies to be unhelpful and unable to meet their needs (Hadeed & El-bassel, 2006; Kelly et al, 2014; Moe et al, 2007; Short et al, 2000). Moreover, the private and coercive nature of domestic violence makes it difficult to detect (Stark, 2007). Therefore, social support from friends, family, and neighbours may be more helpful for victims at an early stage (Kelly et al 1996; Klein, 2012) and in 'rebuilding lives' in the aftermath of violence (Kelly et al, 2014).

## The impact of social support

The early interest in social support explored the effects of social support on moderating the harm of stress, and the different underlying factors behind the effects (Cobb, 1976). Indeed, there is evidence that social support can both have a 'buffering effect' in difficult life-situations (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills 1985), and have an immediate positive impact on well-being in everyday life (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985). High levels of perceived social support have proved to be a protective factor against stress (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Thoit, 1995), mental health problems (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983), and illness (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991).

Accordingly, social support was found to be a key factor in preventing many negative physical/mental health consequences of domestic violence including suicide (Meadows, 2005; Thompson, 2000); re-victimisation (Goodman et al, 2005; Liang et al, 2005; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Wilcox, 2000); and common physical and psychological symptoms like depression, headache, anxiety, and stomach-pain (Kranz & Östergren, 2000). In contrast, several studies showed that social support fails to protect from violence (Carlson et al, 2002; Liang et al, 2005), indicating that high levels of violence necessitate professional intervention (Goodman et al, 2005).

## Social support research and theory

Social support is an umbrella term for many different behaviours and social phenomena embedded in individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural dynamics. In an early paper Cobb (1976) defined social support as the process of communicating love and care to another person which makes the person feel valued, as well as the perception of belonging to a broader network in which the members share a sense of responsibility for each other. Subsequently, research distinguished between *perceived social support*, perception of support available if needed (Thoits, 1995); *network analysis*, integration within a number of links and connections (Milardo, 1992); and *enacted social support*, forms of action and communication including emotional support, cognitive guidance, tangible support, information (Goldsmith, 2008; Thoits 1986). Social support is conceptualised as happening within an individuals' network, where it is not so much the separate acts that are supportive but rather the integration and inclusion in a social context (Berkman & Glass, 2000). However, women in an abusive relationship often lack social capital, both density in their social network and trust in the social system (Larance & Porter, 2004). This thesis focuses on social support enacted within an online forum that may have community qualities.

### *Enacted support*

Social support as enacted is what people do and say when they are giving support (Goldsmith,

2008). Some of the most common categories are: *Informational support*, information needed to solve problems; *cognitive guidance* to work things through and find the right coping strategy; *emotional support*, the process of gaining empathy, having someone listen who makes an effort to understand; and *tangible support*, practical support such as money, baby-sitting, shelter (Taylor, 2007). One way to conceptualise support is as 'coping assistance' - talking about problems with someone, preferably someone with a similar problem (Thoits, 1986). This is a form of support, in which other people's advice, perspective and input into problems helps to find solutions, but also to approach the problem in a particular way (Thoits, 1986). This interactional perspective on support is linked to theories of emotion work/management (Chapter Two). The value of support is therefore dependent on the actual communication and the context in which the support is located. For example, emotional support is a form of communication that depends not only on the individual's ability to disclose and open up, but also on the receivers' ability to construct an environment where disclosure is possible (Weber & Patterson, 1996), heard and responded to. Thus, to understand the mechanisms behind social support, it is necessary to investigate the actions, their delivery, and how they are perceived (Goldsmith, 2008).

#### *When and how social support is helpful*

All support takes place through communication within supportive relationships (Goldsmith, 2008). Social support can come at a price even if it is perceived as helpful (Goldsmith 2008). For example, helpers can be both helpful and judgemental, and disclosing experiences and emotions can change the relationship between people in a direction that creates dependency. To actually receive someone's support can add more stress to a situation if it is not within an equal relationship, and to receive contradictory advice and directives can be more stressful than not getting any advice at all (Ryan & Solky, 1996). Therefore, Ryan and Solky (1996), and Pierce et al (1996) argue that social support is positive if it takes place in a framework of autonomy, whereas social support in exchange for compromises in the relationship or dependence often has negative consequences on well-being. Social support has also been looked at as a form of currency within relationships, here with specific focus on sympathy (Clark 1987). Candace Clark (1987) argues that giving and receiving sympathy happens within an 'emotional economy' developed to secure social control and identity. Principles based on history of reciprocity, social status, and the severity of the problem, ensure that sympathy flows within a dynamically determined 'margin' for those who 'deserve' it (Clark 1987:298). People who are battling with persistent and largely hidden problems such as domestic violence may no longer be perceived as "worthy" of sympathy when the margin is overdrawn (Chapter Three). Equally, the victim may take a social risk when both seeking and receiving sympathy outside of what is socially acceptable (Clark 1987).

Overall, the benefits of social support depend on the nature of the relationship with the supporter, communication, timing of support, severity of stress, and characteristics of support (Goldsmith, 2008). In short, of vital importance is ‘who is doing what to whom, with respect to what problem?’ (House, 1981:8, as cited in Goldsmith 2008:19). In accordance with a discursive-analytic approach to communication, in this thesis enacted support is understood as a form of communication in a specific context which can explain what was meant and achieved with the supportive acts (Goldsmith, 2008; Chapter Two). Social support can thus be both supportive and troublesome. In this context, not seeking help does not necessarily mean that a person does not want help but may be a sign of anxiety of being trapped and becoming dependant on others. This may be especially true amongst family members. Support from a less close network could be more useful when the close network, kin, are implicated in the abuse, by committing the violence or by failing to challenge it.

## Disclosure, help-seeking and social support

A significant number of studies show that women in abusive relationships disclose violence, and seek support from friends and family before they seek formal support (Patton, 2003; Rose & Campbell, 2000; Wilcox, 2006; Wilcox, 2000). Responses to disclosure of abuse influence a woman's perspective, planning, and decision-making towards ending violence. Renate Klein (2012) points out how disclosing abuse is a ‘risky’ endeavour, and, along with having many positive impacts, can reinforce negative views of self, and self-blame. Supporters can choose to support the perpetrator, and give mixed responses to victims. At the same time ‘third parties’ – the social network - can also help women to become free from violence in their lives (Klein, 2012).

### *Disclosing abuse and seeking help*

Disclosure is distinguished from help-seeking, even if the two often coexist (Klein, 2012). Disclosure means telling someone about abuse, and can be an ongoing process that happens with several people in different ways, over a longer period (Klein, 2012). There are individual and social factors that influence how and if a woman discloses abuse, seeks help, and who she turns to, including ethnicity, social class, age and the area where she lives (Crane & Constantino, 2003; Davis et al et al, 2001). Her individual coping style, whether she is more practically or emotionally oriented, influences the choice to go to the police or seek support with a counsellor or a friend (Wilcox et al, 2000). Whom she asks for help first may influence what kind of support she will search for afterwards (Wilcox et al, 2000).

Patton (2003) identified friends, in particular female friends, to be the key pathway to leaving an abusive relationship. If an abused woman has sufficient social support, it is also more likely that she will seek formal support. Although seeking help from the police can have higher costs for recently migrated women, and may not be seen as an alternative (Wilcox et al, 2000). More

recent research also points to religious and spiritual counselling as highly valued (Kanyeredzi 2014; Jacinto, 2010). In addition, different forms of violence have an impact on who an abused woman turns to for help: if the violence is perceived as serious, and part of a complex pattern of control the victim may prioritise safety and wish to also seek formal help, such as the police, or a refuge (Klein, 2012).

Fear of negative reactions from friends and family, as well as stigma and embarrassment of being “a victim”, can create reluctance to talk about experiences of abuse, and contribute to a process in which a woman finds herself compelled to withdraw from her social network (Enander, 2009; Liang et al, 2005; Wilcox 2000). In some cultures it is considered more shameful to disclose family troubles and rely on support outside the family (Chatzifotiou & Dobash, 2001; Lee et al, 2007). In addition, there are gender ideologies that put pressure on women to keep the family together at all cost (Chatzifotiou & Dobash, 2001; Wilcox et al, 2000). For example, a Greek sample of women endured abuse for a long time before they disclosed the abuse, but when they did, received negative responses from family members who believed that it was the woman’s duty to keep together the family (Chatzifotiou & Dobash, 2001). Pressure to not bring shame on the family leaves the space for action small when seeking to end violence. Enander (2010) investigated 'gendered shame' in a Swedish heterosexual middle-class context. She argues that labelling oneself as 'being stupid' for not leaving an abusive man is connected to a Swedish 'gender equality ideology': an expectation to not be a victim in the first place, and then to leave at the first slap, places a heavy burden on the woman to ‘end violence’ promptly.

Violence can further alter the perception of oneself as somebody who is not very sociable, and this can be an obstacle when seeking help (Rose & Campbell, 2000; Wilcox et al, 2000). Social anxiety and negative views of self can be a result of living in an abusive relationship (Muller & Lemieux, 2000) and can also prevent people accepting support when it is offered.

#### *The links between social support and women’s actions*

Several researchers have observed how the decision to leave and/or seek help is often a rational and carefully calculated process (Liang et al, 2005; Short et al, 2000; Wilcox et al 2000).

Perceptions of sufficient available support, social/economic dependency, and childcare are a crucial part of this calculation (Short et al, 2000; Wilcox et al, 2000). First, the level of support changes meaning making processes. If an abused woman’s possibilities to end violence are perceived as small she may define her experiences of violence as tolerable, or that the abuse is her fault (Goodman et al, 2005). Second, there is a link between social influences and coping styles (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Thompson, 2002). An early paper by Mitchell and Hodson (1983), found that positive responses when seeking help were correlated with active coping strategies. However, a problem focused strategy may only be effective if it is combined with

sufficient social support - emotional and tangible (Kocot & Goodman, 2003). When the close informal network is not forthcoming, active coping strategies can be psychologically draining and lead to greater feelings of hopelessness. Mitchell and Hodson (1983) also found that women with a higher number of friends not connected to the partner were more likely to receive positive feedback. Thus, the success of taking action to end violence may depend on whether the approach taken is facilitated by emotional and tangible support, whether the advice a woman receives is consistent with her choice of strategy, and whether contextual circumstances make a social change possible.

Other researchers have explored how racism changes how black women cope with violence, and their possibilities for accessing support. For example, Richie (1996) found that poverty, stigma and shame of both being a battered woman and of being Afro-American intersected. In Richie's study gender, racism, and class played a role in how domestic violence was experienced, and in particular for women's attempts to end violence. Whilst white women reached out to the police and formal help, black women tried to end violence within the relationship, fearing racism from the police, and to protect their partners and the black community from further racism. One recent study explored how the combination of racism and immigration had an impact on Afro-Caribbean heritage women's experiences of abuse and seeking help in the UK (Kanyeredzi 2014). These are examples of how, although the acts of violence are the same, the context of the crime - who it happens to, and where - changes how violence is responded to.

#### *Helpful and unhelpful responses*

Beeble et al (2008) identified factors that influenced who in a woman's network would be most likely to help: younger women were more likely to offer support than men and older women. Changing gendered expectations within relationships may explain why younger women are more willing to challenge traditional norms and roles. Generally, women were less likely to blame those who had been abused. More women have experiences with domestic violence; hence the recognition and understanding may be stronger amongst women (Beeble et al, 2008). Two more factors that influenced likelihood to help were: whether people perceived the abuse to be serious; and how well people were informed about the prevalence of domestic violence (Beeble et al, 2008). This also feeds into how people conceptualise abuse and whether they accept non-physical violence as serious.

Many women have, however, expressed disappointment with the support they received (Bostock et al, 2009; Davis et al, 2001; Hadeed & EI-Bassel, 2006; Moe et al, 2007). Responses by informal networks are deemed inappropriate when they: interfere with a woman's decision to end the relationship (Kelly et al, 2014; Rose et al, 2000); expect violence to stop; support the ideology to keep the family and the marriage together; and give up when the survivor does not leave (Patton, 2003). On average women leave and return to an abusive partner five times

(Davis et al, 2001). In a study by Bostock et al (2009) several women experienced lack of recognition of domestic violence and judgement from friends and family who did not understand the complex dynamics behind domestic violence – seeing it as a simple matter of 'just leaving'. As a result, many informal network members stopped engagement when survivors returned to their partner (Bostock et al, 2009). In addition, a common opinion amongst participants in a study by Moe et al (2007) was that family and friends focused too much on the actual violence and could not see the wider picture. Social support from friends and family is frequently a mixture of positive and negative responses, often from the same person (Moe et al, 2007; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Negative responses are often perceived as worse than no support at all (Trotter & Allen, 2009).

#### *Lack of social support*

Social isolation is often a component of domestic violence (Kunst et al, 2010; Rose & Campbell, 2000; Wilcox, 2000) and as a consequence, many women have few people to talk to when ending an abusive relationship (Wilcox, 2000). One reason why a woman becomes isolated is that the partner prevents her from seeing other people (Stark, 2007). In addition, even if a woman has friends and family, many factors can contribute to isolation after leaving the relationship (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993): forced relocation to a new geographical area; broken friendships with people who took the perpetrator's side, and those who did not support the decision to end the relationship; financial constraints that prevent social activities; psychological scars from abuse create an obstacle to trust and letting new people in (Kelly et al, 2014; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). David et al (2001) suggested that living in geographically isolated rural areas can intensify isolation. Interviews with 26 women living in rural areas revealed that isolation - physical, geographical, social (lack of friendships), cultural, and emotional - was the main obstacle for them (Davis et al, 2001). However, a recent study shows that 'low-cost technologies' for example, email, and Skype, can mitigate the effects of physical distance between people after migrating (Kelly et al, 2014:76). Finally, recently migrated women who left their friends and family behind often lack social networks when seeking help, and sometimes lack sufficient English (Bui, 2003).

#### *Community based responses to domestic violence*

In many respects, these findings indicate that, even if a woman possesses a strong will to seek help and become free from violence, their social networks and communities carry considerable weight for how successful such endeavours will be. Thus, the role of informal networks in domestic violence is twofold and complex. On one hand, as pointed out by Kelly (1996), all venues where there is communication between people can be a space for challenging norms and ideologies that permit domestic violence. On the other, gender structures and lack of knowledge in the informal network are also what allows domestic violence to happen in the first place

(Kelly, 1996; Klein, 2004). It may, therefore, be important for women to find alternative social networks within communities or alternative gatherings based on identity, common interests, mutual support and experiences rather than locality, and where members are better informed about domestic violence (Kelly, 1996; Klein, 2004; Klein, 2012).

In addition, there is need for more long-term sources of support and forums to help women build new social networks after violence has ended, to prevent isolation and re-victimisation (Kelly et al 2014; Wilcox, 2006). At the point where violence has ended, a women's own social network may be exhausted, or reduced even if there is still need of support (Wilcox, 2006). The research outlined above also indicates that new creative and complimentary approaches are necessary to help a multicultural, ethnically diverse, geographically dispersed population with different needs. Online mutual support groups are examples of communities that are based on interests and identity rather than geography.

## Reflections

Social support is conceptualised as supportive communication and relationships in which enacted support takes place. This form of communication can facilitate understanding and contribute different perspectives on a problem. However, despite the distinct benefits of social support, many women have negative experiences when disclosing abuse to friends and family. Active attempts to be free from violence may be more draining than helpful if there is not a supportive structure to facilitate the process. This literature, therefore, points to the need for new support venues, less inclined to blame, detached from the women's social networks. The potential of online support is explored in the final section of this chapter.

## **Part Three: Research on online support groups/communities**

Support and social processes in internet support forums have been researched from sociological and psychological perspectives. Many different methodological approaches have been used, including content analysis, survey methods, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and phenomenological approaches. Research from the UK and the US describes the different ways online resources have been employed to provide information and access to community services, referral and advocacy (Finn & Atkinson, 2008; Davenport et al, 2008; Finn, 2000; Kranz et al, 2002; Van Schaik et al, 2010). Within this growing literature there is relatively little discussion of online support group use by abused women. The final part of this chapter discusses conceptualisations of online mutual support groups and research on the forms of support within mutual support online more generally. This will lead to the aims and rationale of this study.

## Terminology and definition of online support forums

Online support forums are conceptualised in many ways; however, the terminology used is rarely discussed and several terms are often used interchangeably. Some stress the medium of communication, such as 'message-board', 'chat-room', 'discussion-forum' (Aho et al, 2012; Sherman & Greenfield, 2013). Others highlight the social dynamic, most commonly 'online support group' (OSG) (Bartlett & Coulson 2011), a term that can be traced back to face-to-face support groups. However, online support forums are different from face-to-face support groups, which are often small, and hold regular meetings (Kurtz, 1997), whereas online support forums are anonymous, public, provide all-day access, and have many members who move in and out of the forum. Therefore, it is increasingly common to conceptualise the support forum as an online community (Lindgren, 2014; Stommel & Koole, 2010; Wright, 2002).

The concept 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) is often applied on online forums more generally as a form of social practice that is organised around common interests: sharing information/expertise and collective learning on a particular topic. This concept is close to the theoretical framework used in this study, and has also been applied to online support forums (Lindgren, 2014; Stommel & Koole, 2010). There have been discussions of whether online forums qualify as communities in the traditional meaning. Today, there is growing consensus that online forums can be communities (Abfalter et al, 2012; Blanchard & Markus, 2004), linking to critiques of traditional notions of community. In this view communities do not need to be based on geography and shared history, but may be organised around interests, religion, shared experiences and identities (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Consequently, online communities are often more specialised and expertise focused (Wellman & Guila, 1999). The nature of online social networks - a combination of weak ties, strong ties, and links between different social networks - may increase the chance of finding specific expertise or shared experience. Reciprocity functions differently, with less expectation that help will be returned by the same person (Faraj & McLure-Wasko, 2005; Wellman & Guila, 1999). Blanchard and Markus (2004) identified typical 'community processes' as mutual support, creating and maintaining identities, and developing trust.

One reason why terminology is rarely discussed is that online support forums are diverse. They vary in many respects - size of membership, media available for communication, whether they are expert-led and/or linked to an organisation. Such variations change the meaning of the forum and subsequently the terminology used. Thus, online support forums have many possibilities depending on size and set-up, and one is to develop community qualities. The focus here is on internet forums that are organised around mutual support and where communication occurs via a message-board. That said, it may still be premature to define the forum in this study. Therefore, I stick to the terms 'online support forum', and 'online support', but this will be

revisited in Chapter Five. When referring in this literature review to specific studies I adopt the terms used by the author.

## The social dynamic in online support forums

Reflecting the theoretical framework (Chapter Two), researchers have found that online support is constructed within a more or less outspoken framework around a problem. The meaning of social support is thereby shaped and negotiated between members in a dialectic process, and this influences feelings of belonging, thresholds of acceptance in forums, and conflicts (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010; Marivel & Thombre, 2010; Sandaunet 2008). Attention has been paid to gender (Sullivan 2003), moral codes (Bar-Lev, 2008; Rier, 2007; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009), norms/rules (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010), and ideologies (Sneijder, 2005).

Signs of community and friendship amongst members have been identified in several studies (Aho, et al, 2012; Bauer et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2012). For example, participants (four mothers, and 631 messages) who lost a child developed a sense of community and strong friendships, along with support – emotional and cognitive (Aho et al, 2012). At the same time, dominant discourses and social boundaries that are part and parcel of communities influence participation, inclusion, and exclusion.

Some argue that the supportive dynamics in online support groups may be moral rather than therapeutic offering moral packages that shape conversations (Bar-Lev, 2008) and protect the norms and rules of the community (Stommel & Koole, 2010; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). Several researchers have concentrated on the discursive tools used in online support forums for people who have HIV/AIDS (Bar-Lev, 2008; Rier, 2007). Bar-Lev (2008) found that members used emotionally loaded narratives in conflicts and to reach moral consensus within the forum. Rier (2007) showed that members were persuaded and sometimes strongly advised to inform their sexual partners that they had HIV/AIDS.

Dominant discourses may also build thresholds for entry into online support groups (Stommel & Koole, 2010, Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). For example, Vayreda and Antaki (2009) found that new members often received unsolicited harsh advice to go to the doctor, and not return to the forum until they had accepted the biomedical explanation of bipolar disorder. This ensured that everyone in the forum shared the same medical perspective/ideology on the symptoms and causes of bipolar disorder (Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). The same processes were evident in a forum for people with eating disorders (Stommel & Koole, 2010). Moreover, Aakhus and Rumsey (2010) found that in order to create a supportive community, members had to manage and understand support as a group. Collision of different ideas of support could lead to conflict. Here, conversational norms functioned to create a supportive environment, but conflicts emerged when different ideas of support were in tension or norms challenged. In addition,

perceived failure to 'fit in' can easily lead to withdrawal from the group. Sandaunet (2008) conducted interviews to explore why women had chosen to 'drop-out' of a cancer support forum. A significant proportion thought that their level of symptoms or depression did not sit easily in the forum – they were too ill or too healthy. This led to feeling discomfort sharing stories and negative emotions when many others in the forum were 'worse off'. Others felt pressured to appear positive in order to fit the stereotype of being a 'strong victim' battling against the disease.

More generally, Sandaunet (2008) explored whether the invisible/anonymous internet context could provide a more liberating context where stereotypes could be challenged, but found that common stereotypes, such as the 'good cancer survivor' were equally present in narratives, whereas difficulty with coping and fear was less present. In addition, in Sullivan's (2003) study, support happened within the conventions of western 'gendered communication': women focused on personal stories; men discussed technicalities of cancer treatments.

Thus, online support forums encompass norms, rules and moral codes that influence communication and content on the site. Specific discursive frameworks developed within a forum determine who will have access, who may feel comfortable, and in what ways the forum can be useful. Other researchers have measured and evaluated supportive actions in online support groups/communities.

## Enacted support in online support forums

Several authors argue that engagement in support groups/communities can lead to a sense of empowerment (Barak et al, 2008; Høybye et al, 2005; Bartlett & Coulson, 2011), which has to do 'with bettering a sense of self control, with well-being, self-confidence, mood state, self-image, loneliness, optimism and even with a sense of control over a disease' (Barak et al. 2008:1879). Processes of empowerment have been identified: sharing information; challenging action and increasing decision making amongst members; increasing one's social network; and gaining confidence in a non-threatening online environment (Barak et al, 2008). Four areas will be examined in more detail: social/emotional support; sharing information; sharing experiences; and impact on actions. All studies reviewed here have a similar setting as the forum in this study: mutual support through postings on a message-board focusing on a variety of issues including bipolar disorder, cancer, depression, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy loss, and single young mothers.

### *Social and emotional support*

Emotional and social support online is widely measured and acknowledged, especially with respect to building friendships and overcoming isolation (Bauer et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2012). Early content analyses showed that emotional and social support were important parts of online

support in an online support group on depression, and may even reach higher levels than face-to-face support groups (Salem et al, 1997). More recent studies have confirmed this from the perspective of the forum-users on other topics. For example, in a 21-month longitudinal study by Zrebiec and Jacobson (2001) 75 per cent of 569 users in a forum on diabetes reported satisfaction with the provision of emotional support. In another quantitative study (Barrera et al, 2002), 75 men and 85 women with diabetes were randomly selected and divided into four different conditions: access to information; personal coach; online mutual support; or both coach and online support. After only three months the two latter conditions had significantly improved the level of perceived social support (Barrera et al, 2002).

Some findings indicate that user satisfaction with social support may be correlated with level of use, which in turn was correlated with decreased life stress (Wright, 2000). In contrast, Mo and Coulson (2010) found no correlation between perceived level of social support and level of use. Support group users (n=640) in a forum on HIV/AIDS completed a number of instruments, including perceived social and emotional support. Frequent users did, however, report a higher level of perceived emotional support than moderate users (Mo & Coulson, 2010).

#### *Sharing information*

Knowledge is crucial both for decision-making and taking action (Barak et al, 2008). Several studies on different issues show that online support forums are venues for giving and receiving information (Van Uden-Kraan et al, 2008; Vilhauer, 2009; Im et al, 2007; Salem et al, 1997; Mo & Coulson, 2008; Zrebiec & Jacobson, 2001). Moreover, in one case, information provided in online support groups on cancer was preferred by the participants over other sources (Van Uden-Kraan et al, 2008). However, in another study people expressed concern about unreliable information (Im et al, 2007).

#### *Sharing experiences and disclosure*

Sharing stories and experiences are one of the most common activities in, and reasons why people use, online support groups (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Bauer et al., 2013; Høybye et al, 2005; Salem et al, 1997; Vilhauer, 2009). Qualitative research on breast cancer forums brings insight to how storytelling and sharing of information online can have a rehabilitative effect and create empowerment (Høybye et al, 2005, Vilhauer, 2009). To learn how other people survived a similar crisis became a means to cope with one's own illness (Høybye et al, 2005). Vilhauer (2009) came to a similar conclusion, claiming that sharing similar experiences has therapeutic effects, including helping others. Moreover, quantitative research has investigated shared experiences and storytelling in content analyses as a form of disclosure. For example, Salem (1997) investigated 1,863 postings by 533 participants in a 'mutual-help group' on depression. OSGs had a higher level of disclosure than face-to-face support groups. A more elaborate account is provided by Barak and Gluck-Ofri (2007) a decade later on cancer and bereavement.

Here, analysis of 240 threads showed that the style of self-disclosure in an online support group is very similar to disclosure in a face-to-face setting, i.e. it matches the level of self-disclosure in the previous speaker/message.

#### *Impact on coping strategies*

Adopting better and more active coping processes is considered a sign of empowerment (Barak 2008). Qualitative and quantitative studies have delivered mixed evidence on how OSGs influence coping strategies and facilitate internal and external coping (Mo & Coulson, 2010; Wright, 1999). Satisfaction with an OSG has been correlated with positive coping strategies (Wright, 1999), and frequent support group users showed a significantly higher level of positive coping strategies (for example active coping and planning) than less frequent users (Mo & Coulson, 2010). However, neither of these studies reveals whether online support forum use facilitates positive coping or whether it is in itself is a sign of pre-existing positive coping skills.

Mutual support has been found to have an impact on relating to professional help. Some claim that online support can help with respect to information about and understanding of meetings with professionals (Bartlett & Coulson, 2011); other studies suggest that negative attitudes on professional support may create reluctance to seek further help (Chung, 2013; Waldron, 2000). A third perspective suggests that mutual support is used more by those who already lack trust in formal agencies, or fear coercion and/or the potential costs of formal support (Townsend, et al, 2012). Mutual support thus may be a place to discuss questions before and after meetings with professionals to address these concerns (Bell et al, 2011).

### Online support for abused women

Only three studies have explored the use of online support forums on domestic violence (Hurley, 2007; Lindgren, 2014; Westbrook, 2007), and only one of these studies is from the UK (Hurley, 2007). Prior to these three, Finn and Lavitt (1994) made the first attempt to evaluate the possibility of providing computer mediated support for sexual abuse survivors in a UK context. In an optimistic report the authors outlined several supportive activities: sharing information; discussing problems; sharing personal experiences; letting off steam; overcoming isolation; developing social networks. More recently, another content analysis from a study of online support for male sexual abuse survivors concluded that the forum provided emotional support, information, esteem, and community dynamics (Yeager, 2012). Whilst sexual abuse is a common feature in abusive relationships, domestic violence creates many other problems as described above.

Hurley et al (2007) conducted a textual analysis of posts published in a public online support group for domestic violence survivors in the UK. They emphasise how new members wrote 'a new self' with other members as an audience. Whilst no single 'victim-survivor identity'

dominated, members positioned themselves anywhere between being worse off than other members and being not as badly off as the others. In addition, members constructed a new self in relation to the old self, and in relation to the abusive partner. The latter evolved through discourses of love and who is to blame for the abuse. These analyses provide an interesting perspective on self-reflexive work in a support-forum but do not locate it in the interaction between members. Two relevant studies have also been conducted in the US. Westbrook (2007) explored information exchanges between women on a 'bulletin board community'. Five broad categories emerged: finances; law; mental health; information on domestic violence and logistics. Several women inquired about therapy for survivors (referring to depression or suicidal thoughts), and information on how to set up a separate bank account and credit card from the partner. Posts enquired about the logistics of ending violence such as finding local services, how to change phone numbers and move to a new address. Multiple sources of help were suggested or recommended by members. Forum members most commonly suggested searching for information on the internet and in self-help books (Westbrook, 2007). This study gave evidence that online support forums can support seeking help and finding and evaluating information and resources.

Waldron (2000) identified "potential harmful effects" of online support in a content analysis of three different forums for sexual abuse survivors, people with disability, and parents. A few elements of potential harm relevant to sexual abuse were: self-identified sex offenders publishing posts on a forum in which they minimised other members' pain; and a collective negative attitude towards formal help systems which may create barriers to medical and professional advice. Urgent requests for help were not always responded to or not responded to in time. Preliminary conclusions to be drawn from these results are that an online support group may need supervision by a trained moderator (Waldron, 2000).

One recent network analysis provided insight into supportive dynamics in an online forum for abused women in a Swedish context. Lindgren (2014) showed how words indicating 'fear' or 'weakness' were most frequently coded in messages from one-off posters who did not belong to any of the strong networks within the forum. In contrast, the categories 'concrete strategies', 'empowerment', and 'emotional support' were mostly coded within posts by socially integrated members who frequently wrote to each other. The second form of members ('givers') carried out most of the support to members who lacked social connections in the forum and were more in need. In addition, receivers eventually became supporters, indicating that the forum organised organically through a 'community of practice' (Lindgren, 2014). Lindgren proposes that the collective and individual processes identified could give shape to a form of 'collective intelligence' that may identify abuse and warning signals, and disrupt normalisation.

## Reflections

Psychological studies describe online support as a venue for disclosing personal trauma and receiving emotional support, information, and coping assistance. In contrast, research from a sociological perspective reveals a normative social environment with boundaries. All three studies addressing online support for domestic violence victim/survivors provide valuable information about uses, functions and possible harm of such support. However, none of the studies provide a full account of support online for abused women, for example from members' own perspectives or those of forum hosts.

## Conclusions

Research relevant to the role of mutual support online during the process of ending domestic violence concerns three topics: perspectives on domestic violence; the intersection between social support and help seeking; and online support forums.

Domestic violence was explored as a gendered phenomenon with consequences for abused women's health, perception of self, equality, and 'space for action'. Agency within an abusive relationship is situated between the impact of internalised violence and control on one hand, and resistance to abuse on the other. Research also has explored ending violence as an emotional-cognitive process tightly linked to levels of support. In particular, increased awareness about violence and giving up hope for the relationship were central. It was further discussed how access to knowledge can help to facilitate understanding and the process of ending violence.

As access to specialised services currently in the UK is limited, social support matters. It was conceptualised as a form of communication that can both facilitate or undermine disclosure and further help-seeking and depends on the context and the supporter. A particular problem in social support was lack of knowledge of violence, victim-blaming, and contradictory encouragements to either 'save the marriage' or 'leave at the first slap'. Those, often female friends, who understand the complex dynamics of violence and support women's choices were helpful. New forms of community responses such as online support may be beneficial for both providing a safe space for support, and removing reliance on ill-equipped or unavailable social networks.

Online support forums can facilitate different forms of support: emotional support; information; and positive coping strategies. Part of the supportive aspects of such forums entails presenting a particular perspective on a problem, comprising specific ideas for how to know, and how to deal with a common issue, whilst also offering a space to come to terms with it. In light of the importance of meaning making for women who have been abused, online support could be an additional source of support, along with support from friends, family, and specialised services.

The multiplicity of meanings of online mutual support-support group, community and social network-leave the use of such groups/communities open to change and development.

Very few studies to date have addressed online support for abused women, and only one in the UK. They are limited to textual analyses of the processes of giving/receiving information, identity formation, and network analysis of members. There is a gap in knowledge about the role of online support for women who are ending violence and the impacts of OSG-facilitated meaning-making. This thesis begins to fill this gap. Pursuing an inductive and exploratory approach, the research aims were revised several times (Chapter four). The final set of aims were formulated as six questions.

1. *What were the goals behind the initiative of one online support forum, and how was it developed?*
2. *What are the experiences of the forum as a means of support from the perspective of the members?*
3. *Which themes and topics are dealt with in one online forum on domestic violence?*
4. *How do forum users perceive the impact and relevance of these themes?*
5. *How do members construct emotions, violence, victims and perpetrators in written postings?*
6. *How do members use violence discourse in support processes?*

The methodology developed to address these aims and the original data collected are described in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Methodology and Methods

The idea of this study emerged from a general interest in the internet, and how it changes the perception of space in the home. Whilst having been interested in feminist theory for a long time, the focus on domestic violence was partly a coincidence and my previous theoretical understanding of domestic violence limited. Over the course of the research my interest in domestic violence increased but that in the internet as a social medium went in the opposite direction. Accordingly, the focus slowly shifted from the specifics of the medium to a deeper interest in domestic violence theory and women's experiences of violence.

### *The revision of the research aims*

Obstacles and new interests led to removal and revisions of research aims along with the research. An original interest in exploring whether online support forums are a resource available to everyone, i.e. do minority women use them and do they feel they belong is interesting and important, but the question presumes that a large enough sample of minority women with experiences of using online support could be identified. At the outset of this project, it proved difficult to simply find *one* forum suitable for the study, let alone one with diverse groups of users. Moreover, another aim developed at the outset of this research- to contribute to the improvement of online support facilities for domestic violence survivors' – was removed as a specific aim to give space for depth analysis of writing on violence. The findings can still be useful for anyone developing, improving or moderating online support on domestic violence. As the methodology developed other aims were revised: one research question 'to explore support forum users' perception of the relevance of themes to their situation and needs' was revised to exploring the *impact* of themes addressed, and indirectly their relevance. In this way, analysis of support processes could be compared with members' perception of the impacts of them.

Two perspectives have shaped the methods and ethics of this thesis: feminist perspectives on violence against women and the internet as a specific social setting and research field.

### **Research procedures: data collection and ethical considerations**

The empirical research generated three sets of data: a sample of posts from forum members; an online survey of forum members; and interviews with forum moderators. The three strands of data collection were designed to answer the research questions. The first data set, postings, were collected to answer question three, five and six: mapping topics discussed on the forum; exploring how members made sense of violence through writing; and how members used

violence discourse in support processes. The second strand of data, the survey, was developed and administered to shed light on questions two and four: support forum users' perception of the impact and relevance of themes addressed in the forum; and members experiences of the forum as a form of support. Finally, the interviews with the moderator and the manager explored research question one - the background of the forum, its history and development. All data were collected from people who were using a specific domestic violence online forum. Standards for undertaking ethical research on the internet are still in development, in particular in the field of domestic violence where survivors are high-risk participants. The development of methods, and ethics, was, therefore, an ongoing process and will be discussed chronologically alongside the research process.

There is no consensus on the "best ways" to conduct research online. Researchers are encouraged to find temporary solutions and devise research methods that address each specific problem: not perfect, just good enough (Karpf, 2012).

### Selecting the forum and seeking collaboration

Different types of support forums on the internet were explored before deciding which kind of forum would be suitable for the project. The forum developed by Woman's Aid, a prominent UK charity organisation working to end violence against women was selected, guided by safety concerns, internet ethics, the research questions, and availability. First, research on the use of online resources provided by domestic violence services has identified two concerns: widespread unawareness that anyone can read posts and write personal information posted in a public space online; and lack of knowledge on how to hide traces of online activity from an abusive partner (Finn & Atkinson, 2008). It was therefore important to choose a forum that stated the public status of the site and offered education on how to hide online activities. This yielded one public online forum that uses a format of message-boards based on threads embedded within information on domestic violence and links to nationwide/local domestic violence services. This forum also used trained moderators who removed ineligible posts and personal details accidentally posted by members. The forum was aimed at women aged 18 or older who experienced or were experiencing domestic violence. On the basis of this, authors of posts are assumed to be women and domestic violence survivors over age 17. The final decisive factor was that collaboration with the forum host was obtained. Moderators helped to administer the survey and the forum host agreed to the use of postings from the message board. In exchange for permission to carry out the research on the forum, I prepared, before the project was completed, a report with preliminary findings from the survey that addressed specific questions of interest to the forum host.

## Observation of the message-board

The analysis of postings to the message-board aimed at mapping out what was dealt with in the forum and how different users contributed to this process. This involved sampling textual data from the message-board, and making online observations of threads as they appeared on the board. Threads are a form of textual communication started by a post from one of the members. Other members respond and this creates a long list (thread) of posts that can be read as a form of asynchronous conversation (similar to an email conversation; minutes, hours or days can pass between posts). Threads – which can be up to 50 pages long- often drift from one topic to many others, and can continue over several days. In this forum, posts appear on the message-board as soon as they are written; moderators do not vet posts before they appear on the board but may respond to, edit, or delete them once they have been posted. The average size of a post is around one hundred and fifty words, with a range from a few words to over a thousand.

In the field of internet research this combination of observing the process of posting and analysing the content of postings could be positioned somewhere between approaches in which internet ethnographers participate, and become part of the community as is common in research on virtual communities (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004; Markham, 1998; Turkle, 1997); and approaches in which researchers download material and analyse it as text, a commonly used method for research on online support (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Hurley, 2007).

In a so called ethnographic methodological approach, data collection and analysis are intertwined in a process of both observation and participation of ongoing social processes (Kendall, 1999; Markham, 1998). The rationale is to understand from ‘inside’ the practices of a particular community (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004). This entails a meaning-making practice in which the researcher becomes part of a culture, and in this way both influences it, and becomes influenced by it. Researchers adopting this methodological approach often point out that ‘there is no such thing as a non-participant observation’ (Dorothy Smith, 1990 as quoted in Gatson & Zweerink, 2004:195-196), to highlight the dialectical process between the researcher and the researched. Thus, the epistemological principles of ‘subjectivity’ as the locus of the knowledge production, is built into the practice of ethnographic research.

In a similar vein, ethnographic internet researchers have highlighted how researching online environments influences both method and epistemology (Kendall, 1999; Markham, 2005). Without any physical clues, the researcher has to rely on textual clues, which may result in researchers taking more liberties when interpreting meaning, shaping data collection, and determining the focus of analysis (Kendall, 1999; Markham, 2005). In addition, even if the researcher has chosen to not participate directly in the community, within a social constructivist epistemology the researcher still participates in the construction of meaning, at least with regard to the meaning of the research findings. Being a participant may be even more important online

where a disembodied environment could increase the risk of misreading the meaning of a message (Kendall, 1999), and the distinction between observing and participating is more significant (Markham, 2005).

Bearing in mind advice from the ethnographic researchers, one important methodological decision was whether I would make myself known to the members in the forum or not. Despite arguments about the importance of the researchers' participation, I chose a non-intrusive approach. The forum in this study was for domestic violence survivors only. To write in the forum as a researcher would go against the policy of the forum. It could also have changed the experience of the forum for members and interrupted its natural flow. Thus, being active in the forum was not an option, and could have harmed both the research and forum. Observations of the social processes on the message-board were restricted to "watching" and downloading archived material. The time spent observing enabled understanding of 'situated meanings' of writing: what is meant with a particular message in a given context (Gee, 2005). This is crucial in any discursive textual analysis, and is best learnt through gaining knowledge of the social context. That is, knowledge of the author of a message, who the message is directed to, and the specific situation in which it is delivered. The participatory element in this research was therefore engagement from a distance (lurking), a form of systematic effort to improve the 'inside' understanding of 'situated meanings' and social processes on the forum.

#### *"Engagement from a distance"*

A key challenge in the analysis of posts was to interpret the meanings of messages. To increase the validity of the interpretation, I engaged in sometimes daily readings of posts in the forum. This fieldwork was ongoing during several periods over the project. I preferred to dip in and out by visiting the forum in more intense periods rather than for example a number of hours a week every week. This enabled me to follow recent controversies, dilemmas and discussions. Sometimes this was an intellectual process that produced pages of notes along with ideas of how the observations might link to theory. At other times, reading posts mainly contributed to becoming more familiar with, and improving, the implicit knowledge of the forum culture. When someone appeared to be in an acute dangerous situation I was only one of many who frequently visited the board to read the latest updates.

This online fieldwork helped me to: understand the language of those engaging in the forum; distinguish between different types of writing; develop sensitivity to implicit meanings in posts and social dynamics; identify different types of members; follow particular members; and identify trends in discussion topics. My field notes reveal the many different reflections and perspectives taken about what might be the forum's "true" nature. On occasion, I felt overwhelmed by positive impressions: recognising the true dedication taking place in the forum - the empathy and honesty between members. At other times, the performative dimension of

conversations stood out. Moreover, I sympathised with the moderator who thought that sometimes members spent too much time thinking about their partner rather than focusing on their own lives and future. However, there were also times when I sympathised with some of the members who thought that moderators were unnecessary strict. I have empathised with, felt solidarity, anger, happiness, on behalf of others on the forum. Whilst undertaking analysis, I found evidence of similar reflections and feelings in the survey responses, the interviews with the moderators, and in posts. My responses were therefore similar to those of the participants in the forum.

In this way, an understanding of the situated meanings of postings was acquired through moving back and forth between the more and less analytical roles of researcher and reader. Such immersion helped me to make a better reading of messages, and to increase awareness of the ethical decisions as to which quotes to include in the thesis and which to leave out.

#### *Collecting threads for systematic analysis*

The effortless process of downloading data from the internet can result in very large datasets. The sample size of systematically downloaded threads from community archives varies between a few to thousands of threads depending on the type of analysis pursued, and the technique/resources available to analyse them. For researchers conducting quantitative analyses the sample criteria might be all threads within a set timeframe; for example, Westbrook (2007) sampled 1326 threads (7566 responses). However, when the purpose is to conduct in-depth qualitative analysis, the sampling criteria is often specified by content, and the sample size considerable smaller. For example, Stommel and Koole (2010) sampled 27 threads (215 postings) for the purpose of conducting conversational analyses; Mo and Coulson (2008) sampled 85 threads (1,138 posts) for a qualitative content analysis; whereas Marivel and Thombre (2010) sampled 200 threads (number of posts unknown) to conduct a thematic interpretative analysis. Thus, although downloading threads is easy, the sampling depends on criteria, analytic style, and the reach of the study.

Observations and data collection were pursued in several cycles to gain a more holistic understanding of the forum (Gee & Green, 1998). The starting point was to map out what was going on in the forum more broadly, as well as gaining a rough estimate of the proportion of different support processes. This enabled refinement of the areas to select for in-depth analysis. The number of threads depended on how many seemed necessary to reach a point of saturation after which content became repetitive or failed to yield new insights. However, new themes and directions in the analysis later prompted sampling of more threads. The priority was to capture as much complexity as possible. Therefore, different types of samples, both systematic (sequential) and selective (where a new or unusual theme emerged), were collected from different periods over a year (Table 4:1). Systematic sampling starts at a random place on the

message board and subsequently copies all threads up to a chosen number, whereas selective sampling refers to threads that were chosen on the basis of its content. The basis for the selective sampling included any topic that had not been previously encountered, and all threads which shed light on or further complicated a previous analysis. The first selections were systematic, were assembled at four occasions over 20 months. In the first round, 75 threads were downloaded from five different places in the archive of threads written during the period Feb-April 2011; these became the foundation for the coding frame. Threads were selectively collected at three more occasions, in these instances they were taken directly from the message-board in order to catch ongoing discussions that may overlap over several threads. A fifth collection identified 34 “special threads”, which (at least at the time) seemed to be different or went beyond the initial themes and were picked out during the more unstructured readings in the forum. Table 4.1 summarises the creation of the data set of threads; the date refers to the time period in which the threads were published on the message board, not when they were sampled.

*Table 4.1: Systematic and selective sampling of threads*

<b>Collection</b>	<b>Publication-date</b>	<b>Nr of threads</b>	<b>From Where/How</b>
1	February/April 2011	75	Systematic/ 11-12 threads per archive
2	November/December 2011	30	Systematic/The message-board
3	August 2012	44	Systematic/The message-board
4	November/December 2012	32	Systematic/The message-board
5	February 2011/December 2012	34	Selective/The message board and the archives
<b>Total Threads: 215</b>			

One challenge was to know when to stop collecting threads. The forum was under constant development, hence new data was made available that could potentially change the directions of analysis. Therefore, it became necessary to officially end the data collection. Once the 215 threads were compiled, they were numbered and catalogued in Word files and entered into Nvivo. The first content analytic process included all threads, but once specific themes were defined for discursive analysis, the number of threads was reduced depending on specific content sampling criteria. This latter selection is described in the discussion of the analysis, and in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight.

### The process of undertaking ethical research in an online forum

Decisions about ethics were made throughout the research project. Some guidelines had to be adjusted to accommodate the requirements of the forum host. In addition, issues that arose

during the project prompted more changes.

#### *Following academic ethical guidelines*

Although there is 'no official guidance' for how internet research should be carried out, this project followed recommendations based on the most up to date discussion of these matters and guidelines for ethical research in general (Ess, C., & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002, and later in Markham & Buchanan AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012). These guidelines are based on comments and contributions from eight countries (including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Sweden, the UK and the US) and provide a summary of the ethical dilemmas, discussions, and practical examples that have emerged. The guidelines are formulated as a case-based rather than top-down approach to ethics. This means that each case should be treated separately, and new ethical dilemmas dealt with as they arise in the research process. Having participants in this study who are domestic violence victims adds an additional layer of ethical considerations. Several potential risks to the participants were considered and explored.

Research with human subjects requires particular procedures and consent from those whose stories or behaviour are researched (The British Psychological Society, 2010). According to current debates, analysis of posts to an online message board is research with human subjects if the posts collected can be identified as private (Ess, C., and the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Mann & Steward, 2000). However, the distinction between private and public on the internet is blurred and no clear principles have yet been established for how to determine when researchers should treat an online community as private rather than public. At this point, it depends on whether people have reason to believe that what they write on a message board is private: if one needs a password to access archived posts; or if researching or recording posts is against the policy of the message board. In addition, some researchers argue that the discussion of whether the internet research counts as research with human participants is beside the point (Markham & Buchanan and the ethics working committee AoIR, 2012). Other factors are more important for ethics, for example 'harm, vulnerability, personally identifiable information' (Markham and Buchanan AoIR, 2012:6). Thus, even in cases where, according to the given principles, no human participants are involved, the researchers may still be responsible for assuring that no harm is done to participants or online communities.

Taken together, according to ethics standards, as a general principle, publicly published data can be used and quoted without informing authors or seeking informed consent. However, there are different opinions on whether and in which situation this can be considered ethical. The current orthodoxy is that each researcher must make a situated judgement based on the nature of the topic examined and the forum (see, Markham & Buchanan and the ethics working committee AoIR, 2012; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Mann & Steward, 2000; NESH, Norway, 2002). A

considered opinion of online ethics advises researchers to seek permission from the site owner, and informed consent from people whose writing will be quoted (British Psychological Society, 2007; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; NESH, Norway, 2002; Sharf, 1999). Some argue that obtaining consent from the forum host only is insufficient, in particular when the topic dealt with in the forum is sensitive, the members of the forum are vulnerable, and the research will be participatory. Other researchers have made the decision to not seek consent referring to the principle of publicly published material, and arguing that contacting members may be perceived as intrusive (see for example Hurley et al, 2007; Rier, 2007). In this study, as outlined above, a forum was selected that stated clearly the public status of the site and warned site users that disclosing any personal information on the site such as phone numbers, geographic location and real names carries risks. One could therefore conclude that it would be acceptable to use threads from the forum without consent from individual members. Consent to pursue research had been sought, and been approved, but only from the organisation, not the members themselves. However, the members in this study belong to a “high risk” group. Many of the stories written in the forum include details which could identify a woman to someone she knew. Thus, apart from the issue that using posts could be perceived by some women as a breach of their privacy, there is a small but real risk that some women may be identified by abusive partners which could result in more violence. That said, the risks posed by the abuser also exist independently of the research. Nevertheless, the forum host and I agreed on the following research practice: that all members would not be notified about the research as this could have an impact on how forum members would use the forum; consent to use quotes were to be requested separately from each member via email. However, this practice proved much more complex to realise than originally envisaged.

#### *Finding a situated ethical practice*

Because of the forum’s growth and associated demands on the moderators, by the time consent should have been sought from individual members to quote verbatim from their posts, it was often too late to actually do so. In part, because it would have meant a lot of extra work for the moderators, and in part because many members had moved on and could no longer be contacted. The forum host encouraged the use of the quotes even if no consent was sought. This shows some of the challenges that may arise when undertaking relatively slow academic work within a fast changing internet community (Karpf, 2012). In addition, seeking consent from members would only have respected members’ right to choose to be quoted in publications, not the rights of the remaining members to be part of the research in other ways, or to keep the community anonymous (copying a quote into a search engine would easily lead one to the forum). To make it even more complex, it was no longer clear whether the organisation wished to be anonymous. In the last phase of the writing up process, it was decided that the forum host

was to be named in the thesis. The research had become one way for the forum host to gain some recognition for the forum in promoting woman's safety and they wished to use the survey report in new ways, for example by circulating it within the organisation. Thus, while, on one hand, academic ethical principles prioritise each member's right to choose whether their posts would appear in a publication, on the other, the community as a whole might not benefit from this consent procedure, if publicity in form of research could help its survival.

This prompted a return to the internet literature on ethics for advice, but now with a different reading. The latest guidelines outlined the main principles (Markham and Buchanan and the ethics working committee AoIR 2012): vulnerability of community members determines the researcher's obligations; 'harm' should be defined locally; the principle of 'human subjects' is only relevant together with harm; utility of research should be balanced with the rights of those who are researched. At this point the results from the survey, and the preliminary content analysis provided further guidance. These data had shown the many positives that the forum offered members. Thus, ironically, in order to conduct research to credit the online forum as a survivor's space, it seemed necessary to disrespect this space by using material on the forum without members' permission and possibly put someone in danger. However, responses also indicated that members were very well aware of the risks of writing in a public forum. Fear of breaching anonymity was mainly linked to fear of being "found" by perpetrators who were searching women's whereabouts on the internet through checking their computers and phones. I decided that the benefits of this research - for the forum members, for future research, and to recognise the research that already had been carried out - would justify the risks. Having established a good relationship with the forum host, and having their consent and approval, gave confidence to proceed.

As a compromise, quotes have been selected and represented in a careful way, that is to say I have removed as many details as possible in stories that were so specific that the writer's identity could have been recognised. However, to take away all details in all posts would undermine the analysis and make it impossible to show how the women expressed their struggles in their own words. This would have been a significant loss, since many posts were poignant and compelling for the analysis. All personal information such as geographic location that could identify a person has been removed or anonymised in quotations<sup>3</sup>, and changes were made to minor details. Similarly, usernames were treated like real names and have been anonymised by replacements, because they may be used in multiple forums where others may recognise the individual behind the username (Markham & Buchanan and the ethics working committee AoIR, 2012). The forum host did not wish to be anonymous in reports written for the

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3. Details such as names, ages, and locations were already removed by the moderators.

benefit of the forum.

### *Reflections*

The ethical practice employed in this research is by no means perfect. Despite a large amount of efforts to set up an ethical practice that could serve all parties in this study, research in an online forum, as it has been described here, meant constantly moving within an ethical “grey zone”. To an extent, this may be true for all social research. In a recent article, Downes et al (2014) argue for more reliance on the individual researcher's ability to deal with ethical issues as they arise, in particular when research involves survivors of violence; too strict a regulation may prevent important research to come through. In a new research field such as the internet, ethical grey-zones may be more wildly debated before being replaced by "common sense" procedures. By and large, being a secret observer in a forum where people are revealing private details of their lives can feel intrusive and be uncomfortable even though this may be considered acceptable on a theoretical level, and the research had consent from the forum host. Markham and Baym (2009) points out that methods should not be determined by the researcher's comfort zone, but by the research questions and the ethical considerations. It is also true that comfort zones changed throughout the research, and what seemed to be the right thing at the beginning may at a later date be subjected to further scrutiny. This research is thus a call for a further discussion of how to research online support on domestic violence, so that specific guidelines can be developed. What can be learned from the mistakes and progress made in this study is that it is important to be pragmatic and context sensitive rather than follow general academic ethical principles by the book.

### **Developing and administrating an online survey**

The survey was created in one of the common web tools for survey design and consisted of forced choice and open ended questions (Appendix 2). Employing an online survey may be the only way to survey a community that only exists online (Wright, 2006), and that was the case in this study. Computer-based surveys have many possibilities for advanced design, although both validity and reliability can be affected if the design is not made intuitive for others to use (Groves et al, 2004). The survey designed for this study had a simple layout and there was no evidence during the administration that anyone had difficulty completing it.

The focus was on demographic data - who were the forum users - and themes that emerged from a prior content analysis of posts<sup>4</sup>. These themes were linked to the process of ending violence: making sense of violence; taking action to end violence; and moving on. Some questions were

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4. The preliminary content analysis of postings was never further explored in the thesis; rather it became part of the methodology of constructing the survey and for developing the research aims (see the section about analysis below).

informed by a measure of emotional support (Weber & Patterson, 1996), although the scale was shortened, items rephrased to suit the online environment, and questions were added that addressed the interests of the forum host. The final survey instrument was the outcome of collaborative work with the manager of the forum who added two additional questions about the use and the benefits of the forum moderator. The moderator recruited eight women from the forum to pilot the survey who noted that the survey questions emphasised positive engagement and outcomes and provided limited space to record negative experiences. As a result, additional questions addressed the work of the moderators, and whether the forum could prompt anxiety and feelings of exclusion.

#### *Ethical considerations for the online survey*

Respondents gave consent to the terms and conditions of their participation at the beginning of the survey. Varnhagen and colleagues (2005) have shown that participants' understanding of consent procedures were not less accurate when reading them online compared to off-line; rather, the opposite seemed to be the case. Whilst, it is not possible to verify participants' age when researching an online environment, a forum was chosen for people of age 18 or older and the importance of being 18 or older was also clearly stated in the beginning of the survey. Notwithstanding such potential problems, online surveys may have distinct advantages, offering a stronger sense of anonymity compared to those administered face-to-face.

#### *Administration of the survey*

In collaboration with the moderator an invitation letter with a link to the survey was made available on the message-board for eight weeks (Appendix 1). Several additional posts were written to encourage members to respond. The moderator functioned as a gatekeeper to protect the members whilst stating the forum host's interest in this project. I negotiated my own research interests and the research ethics, which also sought to protect the participant but from an academic point of view. Solutions were therefore often a compromise between different concerns: to reach the target of 100 responses; and to not pressure members to respond who were there to seek help. Despite our best efforts, the original target of 100 participants was not reached. Seventy participants engaged with the survey; of these, 51 completed the whole instrument. The 19 incomplete questionnaires were used in subsequent analyses.

Generating a probability sample from online communities is a challenge. First, any attempts to obtain a sample that can be generalised to the whole population are obstructed by the fleeting nature of the community (Wright, 2006). Even if the number of women registered is known, this number does not reveal how many are currently active nor the number of non-registered people browsing everyday, which can be well over the number of registered people (Preece et al, 2004). In addition, some people systematically respond to online surveys, whilst others turn down all requests (Wright, 2006). Without a good estimate of the population, or control over sample

biases, it is impossible to have a sense of sample frame, or find a generalisable account of the characteristics of the community (Wright, 2006). The qualitative responses were rich, hence the final non-probability sample can be considered sufficiently large to being a valuable qualitative, and to an extent quantitative source of data.

#### *Limitations of the survey*

Response rates for web-based surveys are typically lower than response rates in phone or mail surveys (Granello & Wheaton, 2004), and the use of a large number of open-ended questions can contribute to a high number of partially completed questionnaires (Granello & Wheaton, 2004). Second, the survey may have been biased towards members who wrote posts and was maybe therefore less relevant for people who were only browsing and reading. Demographic data such as ethnic background is sensitive information and may be better asked at the end when responders know what the survey is about. Another sampling bias was the particular set-up for the survey. It was stated in the invitation letter that the findings would be used to improve and to seek funding for the maintenance of the forum. Thus, it is possible that members who were most involved were more likely to respond, and perhaps inclined to depict the forum in a favourable light. Taken together, the forum-participation/collaboration enabled the project and at least partly met internet standards of ethics (see below), but may also have emphasised the perspectives of those who were particularly fond of the forum or interested in maintaining it into the future. Thus, the work with the forum host enabled the research and shaped data collection and “validity” towards a particular perspective of reality.

#### **Semi-structured interviews: the perspectives of forum-hosts**

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with the manager of the forum and one with the moderator. Both had extensive experience working with the forum from its start. There are many approaches for how to conduct interviews; one includes using an interview-guide which corresponds to the interviews conducted here (Kvale, 2007). Semi-structured interviews are positioned between structured and completely unstructured interviews. Structured interviews with a prepared script are closer to a questionnaire, give more support in the interview situation, and enable the interview to be replicated. Unstructured interviews follow little pre-prepared prompts, are more spontaneous and may enable a more flexible and creative process and novel data to emerge (Tracy, 2012). The semi-structured interview guides used here were centred on the forum’s development, moderation, and management (Appendix 3). Questions varied depending on the roles of the interviewee: questions to the manager were more focused on the background to the forum and early development, whereas the second interview asked more about moderation and its challenges. In accordance with the epistemology outlined above, the content of the interviews was partly co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewees: new questions were guided by responses and reactions from the interviewees

(Kvale, 2007). Consent was obtained in writing prior to the interviews. No personal or sensitive information was included. Thus, the risk of participation in the interviews was considered low.

## **Analysis: working across three sets of data**

The data generated from the different methods described above were triangulated to obtain a more complete understanding of the support in the forum, and strengthen the validity of the findings. Each data set complements, validates, and raise questions about the others (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The analysis of postings shows my understanding of how members interact in the forum. When using ‘natural data’, such as threads sampled from the forum, the analyst has minimal influence on how the data was produced, but considerable power over interpreting it. In contrast, with respect to the survey, although members responses are limited to the questions set out, they are forum-members’ own accounts of their experiences. The interviews with the moderators provide a third layer of data, this time from the perspective of the service providers. The rest of this chapter will describe how each data set was analysed.

Analyses were pursued in an iterative process, a form of ‘sequential’ mixed method (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The content analysis of postings brought ideas and material to the fore for how to develop the survey: which questions to ask, and how to thematically organise the questions. In turn, the survey results helped to construct the topics for the interviews (the interviews addressed some of the survey results). In addition, quantitative and qualitative elements from the content analysis and the survey became the foundation for the discourse analysis, and informed the topics that would become the focus for further analysis. Table 4.2 gives an overview of the process of analysis.

*Table 4.2: The process of analysis*

<b>The order of analysis</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. Preliminary analysis of Postings	Mapping themes and topics to develop the survey
2. Preliminary analysis of survey data	Mapping themes and topics for report to the forum-host
3. Second analysis of the postings	Discourse analysis of a selection of themes
4. Second analysis of the survey data and analysis of interviews	Revision of analysis of the survey data together with the analysis of the interviews
5. Final revision of the analysis of posts	Review of in-depth analysis whilst writing the final drafts of the chapters

### **Analyses of postings: themes and discourses**

Whilst recognising that much of the intuitive understanding of social processes in the forum was

learnt through unstructured reading on the message-board, systematic analysis defined, and critically examined intuitive understanding, and became the foundation for Chapters Six to Eight in this thesis. Analysing posts on the internet is a fairly new phenomenon. From one perspective, posts are written texts that can be addressed with tools for textual analysis. From another perspective, the posts are a peculiar form of conversation into which both dyadic and group conversational dynamics enter. Taken together, data in this strand of the study are written texts, produced to converse with other forum members within the particular context of the forum. The first decision to make was whether to analyse the threads as a coherent conversation and let each thread pass as one section, or whether to separate the text within each thread/posting based on content. Threads typically dealt with many issues that could be sorted by different themes reflecting the chaos of everyday life, where meanings of violence were woven into descriptions of daily events, and reflections.

To begin with, inspired by inductive qualitative content analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), content belonging to each category was listed and summarised from the 215 threads, as if it was written by the same person in Nvivo. This is a strategy often taken when analysing focus groups (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), and suited the purpose of capturing the variety of content in regard to domestic violence. The purpose was to both broadly define the usage of the forum and to analyse the content of the discussions that took place (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The analysis aimed to be inductive; therefore, no categories were created beforehand. All 75 threads (Collection 1 in Table 4.1) were first read several times and ideas for further analysis were recorded in notes and memos. Threads were subsequently organised and reorganised under the following themes in the process of ending violence: the characters/characteristics of people involved in violence; definitions and understandings of violence; living with violence (including parenting); taking action to end violence; court and child-contact; the aftermath; information and links to books and media. Each theme had several sub-headings and revealed that the forum was populated by members at all stages in the process of ending violence, and that members discussed many aspects of violence. Whilst this part of the analysis became the foundation for all subsequent analyses, it was not explored further for two main reasons.

First, the initial categories did not sufficiently capture the exchanges that took place in conversions, i.e. how support processes happened in threads. Second, the rapid changes in the forum required a less time-vulnerable form of analysis. Karpf (2012), amongst others, has pointed to the short-lived validity of findings from internet research. The internet changes faster than any other social environment, whereas the time it takes to apply for funding, carry out a research project, and publish, can take four to six years (Karpf, 2012). Thus, one of the challenges of conducting internet research is to produce knowledge that is still of value at the time the research is finished, an analysis that goes beyond the specific content of conversations.

On the other hand, this issue may also be indicative of false presumptions of social stability in some research approaches rather than a problem unique to internet research. In any case, one way is to find angles and questions that are less time vulnerable. Broader categories could have been less time vulnerable, but could have resulted in a more vague analysis. Nevertheless, the thematic content analysis helped to construct the survey (see above) and define the focus for discursive analysis.

### *Inspired by discourse analysis*

In order to gain a better understanding of underlying discourses behind advice and discussions, and the meaning of online support, a few core themes were analysed inspired by a discourse analytic approach. Having no formal training in discourse analysis, I can only say with confidence that I was greatly inspired by a few analytic techniques and concepts provided by a few discourse researchers (Gee, 2005; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary analytic method and theory that has been applied in linguistic, sociological, psychological, and cognitive studies, but often includes several disciplines at ones (Van Dijk, 2009). The type of discourse analysis used in linguistics-detailed conversational analysis (Have, 2007)-is not the focus of this study. Generally, analysis will concentrate on the meanings behind words and concepts and their functions in social processes. Discourse analysis can be more or less politically oriented (Van Dijk, 2009); focused on the historically located, global meanings of concepts and its implication for power (Foucault, 2002); focused on 'situated meanings' in interactions (Gee, 2005); or grounded in cognitive and psychological theory (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Van Dijk, 2009).

Post-structural discourse analysis, sometimes referred to as 'Foucauldian' analysis, is a tool to explore how ideas are represented in a text, their links to historically situated power dynamics, and how these ideas are confirmed or challenged by other discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Chapter Two). This study draws on such an approach in both theory and analysis. For example, in Chapters Six and Seven broader historically specific discourses are mapped out as starting points of the chapters. However, I found little guidance in this approach for the purpose of studying how members have amalgamated different concepts in new ways, to enable change and action within the local practice of the forum.

Thus, the analysis has also been guided by authors who draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and, in particular, discursive psychology. In contrast to a post-structural analysis, here discourse is not treated as the only social reality (Chapter Two). This makes it easier to envisage an active agent behind utterances and texts who, through connecting and mixing parts of different discourses, can change old and build new ones, and thereby also change the social world (Gee, 2005; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Van Dijk (2003:353) summarises the use of CDA as a way to explore how discourses 'enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power in the society'. For example, in the forum, discussions are informed by the broader context of society, but equally, each individual uses these concepts in new ways to produce and reproduce the specific social structure of the forum. A psychological perspective on discourse analysis is more concerned with how the individual can use discourses in a flexible way to realise personal goals and identity projects (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Chapter Two). The basic assumptions are that people are pressured to say and frame things differently, and they change their opinions depending on the social situation, aim of the conversation etc. What people say is therefore not always a fair measure of their attitudes or position in the world, or the only "truth" of an experience (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Analysing how people are using discourses in conversation, is, thus, a way to move beyond 'attitudes' and 'behaviour', and locate where the logic of people's statements is coming from, and what they achieve in a particular situation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In short, the approach taken by social psychologists is primarily concerned with how and why discourses are applied in different situations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Two analytic tools underpin all of the analytic work on posts: 'interpretive repertoires' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); and 'subject-positioning' (Wetherell, 1998; Chapter Two). Margaret Wetherell (1998:400) defines a discourse as a form of 'interpretive repertoire', that is: "a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes (doxa)". A repertoire is a form of framing, an argument that others recognise, which also places the individual in a different 'subject-position'. From this perspective people's accounts of themselves and other people are not pre-determined by prototypes and pre-categories but are constructed in the conversation to make an argument or narrative (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Positioning the self flexibly between different social categories can bring forward different 'truths'. Most revealing in the analysis was how contradictory repertoires were used simultaneously in threads, which always unveiled normative dynamics and priorities in the conversation amongst women in the forum. Note that for more consistency in the empirical chapters, the term 'discourse' is used rather than 'interpretive repertoire'.

The analysis in this study is therefore both descriptive and critical, and draws on concepts from several authors. The analytic procedure resonates with Gee (2005), who has sought to find a middle ground between social and cognitive/psychological perspectives, and who also encouraged a flexible and creative use of concepts and guidelines.

### ***Procedure***

Two broad areas became the focus for a discourse analysis: 1) how members explain and make sense of violence through discursive constructs; 2) how members use violence discourse when

dealing with the process of ending violence. Having already read all threads several times, it was, at this stage, fairly easy to develop a new index of threads with specific content related to the categories above. Two collections of threads, ‘writing about violence’ (78 threads) and ‘taking action’ (65 threads), were copied into Word files. NVivo was thereafter mainly used as a tool for cataloguing threads, and for searching words across the whole data set. The two collections of threads were later mingled, and the number of threads was eventually narrowed down further as the analysis became more specific, but this is detailed in the relevant Chapters. The main task has been to find regularities in how women use discourses in different situations for specific reasons. Whilst the focus and style of analysis differed depending on the discursive themes explored, all analyses went through four analytic steps. They are here outlined as sequential steps, but were in practice conducted as an iterative process over a nine-month period. Sometimes a single thread could involve all analytic steps.

*Step one: exploring posts through discourse building tasks*

Threads were analysed according to six of Gee’s (2005) partly overlapping ‘building tasks’. The questions below are first paraphrased as in Gee (2005) but subsequently explained in accordance to my interpretation of them.

Question one: how is this text used to make some things *significant* (Gee, 2005:11)? I read this as referring to both finding the general narrative of the post, as well as particular emphases. This did not always need to be explicit questions asked in the post, but could be specific actions, feelings, events, characteristics, concepts, and ‘social goods’. Discursive constructs were used to support what was made significant. The result of such an analysis helped to identify what was most important for women to address, and finding the recurrent discursive constructs used when doing it.

Question two: what *identities* are attributed to the author and to others (Gee, 2005:11-12)? In this thesis, with what terms/in what way is an author describing herself and others (mother, victim, survivor, fool, abuser, partner, or fighter)? How do members use social identities and what meanings are they given in posts? Here, the concepts of agency and subject-positioning became relevant (Wetherell, 1998). Is the author positioning herself as with or without control? What did the author communicate by positioning herself in this way?

Question three: what ‘*social goods*’ are distributed to self and others (Gee, 2005:12)? For this study, ‘what is being communicated as to what is taken to be “normal”, “right”, “good”, “correct”. The focus was to explore how members made different actors responsible for the violence, for ending violence, and how they did this through discursive constructs. However, alternative social goods could be attributed to victim/survivor discourses, actions, withheld actions, thoughts, emotions, support-services, old/new identities, other members.

Question four: is this text used to enact any activities, i.e. *practices* (Gee, 2005:11)? In this context, which actions of the abused/abuser were supported in the post, and which discursive constructs were used to support them? Recurrent themes became actions linked to if, how, and when to deal with violence and in what fashion.

Question five: how is this text *connecting* or *disconnecting* things (Gee, 2005:12-13)? Examples here include: the connections between responsibility of violence and the existence of violence; specific actions in relation to specific concepts; social categories with ‘social goods’. This process helped to identify the dominant discourses and resisting discourses, and the links between different parts of the analysis.

Question sixth: what type of *language* is used (Gee, 2005:13)? Although this was not the main focus, some attention was paid to how the message was delivered. For example, the flexible use of both informal and formal language highlighted how supporters could position themselves as both experts and intimate friends.

Answering these questions identified significant areas of meaning that members often returned to in posts: discourses on the roots of violence; ideas about violence; identities; pathways to truths; and directions for actions.

#### *Step two: finding regularities and patterns*

The second analytic step involved mapping recurrent patterns in what members achieved with using repertoires and discursive constructs: what did members do in conversations in posts? Here, the ‘situated meanings’ (Gee, 2005) of discursive constructs were clarified; as well as the functions of these discourses within the context of the social activity in the forum. Three broader areas of action could be defined: defining and establishing the existence of violence (knowing/identity); defining and establishing responsibility for violence (politics/identity); and establishing a direction for action (practice/identity). Thereafter, regularities and patterns were catalogued for each chapter in Excel. Links between the three main topics were explored. For example, how did normative discursive constructs influence specific actions?

#### *Step three: explaining and consulting theory*

Literature and relevant theory were consulted to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of why these patterns occurred in the social context of the forum. This included identifying how recurrent phrases and statements could be linked to more general historically situated discourses. Examples of broader discourses could be perspectives of victim-survivor, as well as older and newer meanings of domestic violence.

#### *Step four: presenting analyses in chapters*

To preserve the original look of the message, quotes were copied as much as possible as they appeared on the message-board. Only spelling-mistakes that created obstacles for the reading of

the post were initially corrected. However, the large amount of errors in quotes disabled the spelling program used in Word, which prompted a few more corrections. One of the main challenges when presenting the findings was the length of some of the posts. As noted above, the best way to evidence helping processes was to show the sequence between posts. However, posts were often several pages long, meaning extracts had to be shortened, sometimes at the costs of their richness. In addition, detailed descriptions of events that could be recognised were removed or replaced with a short summary. When shortening the post, the space where the text has been removed was replaced with a dot between brackets, a: ‘(.)’. The number of dots is a reference to how much text that has been removed. One dot refers to spaces where only a few words were removed, and three dots, ‘(...)’, when more than a sentence has been removed. Moreover, the issue about space also meant that fewer aspects of the analysis could be represented in the chapters. The selection issue is a challenge for all rich, varied data; the additional issue here is that the focus was on the communication. Thus, to make *one* point, two or three sequential extracts from posts in a thread had to be shown (a post and a response). To give two examples of the same point, a minimum of four extracts had to be shown (two posts and two responses). Sometimes several responses and a reply to a response were necessary to evidence what happened in a thread. To solve this dilemma, fewer examples were selected to represent several aspects of the analysis at the same time, which sometimes led to a more “messy” finish than if each quote would have represented one aspect of the analysis. No thread has been used twice as a major extract in the thesis.

### ***Challenges***

Some argue that discourse analysis should not be partial (Antaki, et al, 2003). The point of the analysis must be more than just identifying discourses. For example, it is not enough to conclude that the existence of counter-blaming discourses is good because they challenge victim-blaming. Another layer of analysis must be conducted to understand the situated meaning of the use of counter-blaming discourses and explore what is both lost and gained in the context of its use. As stated above, this analysis was partial, although the attempt was always made to find the tensions between discourses and not simply position one discourse as the “right one”. Coming from a particular perspective, and when researching an area in which it is easy to take sides, this sometimes proved to be difficult. For example, one task was to find the situated meanings when identifying statements that were aimed to define responsibility of violence. Such statements were often either very obvious, such as ‘it is not your fault’, or part of more complex processes of identity work, which contained contradictions and simplifications that needed to be recognised.

## Analysis of survey and interviews

The purpose of the survey and the interviews was to provide contextual information about the forum and the perspectives of the members and staff. In both analyses I used a descriptive, inductive, thematic analytical method guided by Howitt (2010) and Ritchie and Lewis, (2003). After initial analyses of both data sets, it became clear that both data sets “spoke to each other”, that is to say, presented two perspectives on the same issues, themes etc., and would benefit from being analysed simultaneously and presented in the same chapter (Chapter Five).

### *Analysing survey responses*

Initially, qualitative and quantitative questions were analysed separately. Following Ritchie and Lewis, (2003) all comments from the open-ended questions were read multiple times and coded in Nvivo. There is a debate in qualitative research methods on whether one should/can count qualitative data (Hannah & Lautsch 2011). Counting meanings and words may undermine the focus on variety, uniqueness and depth (Hannah & Lautsch 2011). However, researchers also find utility with using numbers in qualitative analysis (see, for example, Kvale 2006; Miles et al 2014). Explicit counting can be part of analytic techniques used to structure the data, make connections, and achieve an overall sense of what the data is about (Kvale 2007). Miles et al (2014) point out that counting is an intuitive part of analysis – to draw links, find consistency, determine what is important - whether this is acknowledged by the researcher or not. Thus, presenting numbers in writing reveals the analytic process, bringing transparency and clarity to how data has been categorised (Hannah & Lautsch 2011; Miles et al 2014). Following these researchers, counting on the basis of meaning was used as a form of guidance and description when analysing open ended questions to the survey. Numbers helped to map out the dominant views of the forum members, whilst simultaneously highlighting contrasting views and experiences. Numbering occurrences of meaning also verified and illustrated the perception that findings were repetitive: further illustrating normative processes and ideas about support and violence. Finally, in many non-academic contexts, quantified data presents a more persuasive argument for validity and significance (Hannah & Lautsch 2011). In this study, the survey findings were used by the forum host when applying for funding (see above).

For each question in the survey, an index was created with several sub-categories under each question. Sub-headings were reorganised, sometimes melded together, or split into additional categories. Secondly, subheadings were summarised in a Word document. Responses to open ended questions often overlapped, and participants did not always limit their writing to the question asked. In addition, the same responses were repeated over several questions, which to an extent revealed that some questions were similar in nature. Therefore, the third analytical step entailed drawing links between different questions and responses, and subsequently grouping questions and responses within more overarching themes. Basic descriptive statistics

were produced in Excel. The final step was to integrate both quantitative and qualitative results within these themes.

#### *Using incomplete survey responses*

The low number of survey responses (see above) made it necessary to use all data, including incomplete surveys. Reducing the sample would have undermined the opportunity to show the relevance of the forum as a source of support. Many of the incomplete responses were dropouts, responses where the latter part of the survey was incomplete. This could be interpreted as a wish to not take part at all, for example, due to safety reasons. However, as the researcher learned during data-collection, dropping out from an online survey can be a consequence of several things other than withdrawal of participation: lost internet connection; too slow browser; use of a mobile-device which makes completion tiresome/interrupted; lack of time to complete all questions. As noted above, the survey was long, and some members complained directly on the message-board that it was too long; others that they had lost connection in the completion process. Therefore, on the basis of the members' comments and previous research (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; see above), it was assumed that the common reasons for the dropouts were lack of time/energy to complete it, or technical failure rather than a wish to be removed from the sample. In order to make the data useful for the aims of the research-project, the forum-host and the members themselves and for the respondents who spent time completing a part of the survey but could not finish all/were interrupted, all data was used. To recognise that some may have wished to withdraw their participation, no qualitative data is quoted in the thesis from incomplete questionnaires: their participation is only represented numerically.

#### *Analysing interviews*

Detailed accounts and summaries of the two in-depth interviews were created from the recordings to a Word file. Full transcriptions<sup>5</sup> were made of parts of the interviews when this could facilitate analysis. Then a similar analytic procedure as with the qualitative survey data was used. The data from the two interviews were organised in a content coding index. Subsequently, themes were summarised and further explored in a Word file. To some extent, each interview focused on different aspects on the forum's development and maintenance. When the content of the interviews overlapped, the interviewees shared the same perspectives, and complemented each other's knowledge rather than having contrasting views. Therefore, the interview data were not contrasted but integrated.

#### *Integrating both analyses in one chapter*

The next step was to search for a meaningful way to integrate and frame the findings that would stay true to the data sets, i.e. not excluding anything major or significant, whilst at the same time

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5. Full transcription here means that each word and utterance was typed up into a Word file.

identifying themes that could illuminate and complement the thesis and the research questions. Thus, analysis was focused on how members' activity in the forum had made an impact on their process of ending violence: their understanding of violence; taking action; moving on. In addition, analysis explored how members experienced the support in the forum, its advantages and limits. This was complemented and contrasted with interview data: the work behind the message board; the forum's history and development. For example, one of the analytic themes became "tensions" and interesting combinations of the multiple meanings of support found across the data sets, which could not be fully discovered through text analysis.

Moreover, both members and moderators had clear objectives whilst participating in the research: to help the forum's development and maintenance. It seems that many respondents were motivated to bring forward a "point" about the forum, often to its advantage, but also to bring forward something they were not happy with. These "points" were compared, a process which yielded new questions (Chapter Five). Bruno Latour (2007) argues that the identity of a group of people is never static but in constant formation, and is often defined by vocal individuals. This resonates with how some of the analysis in this thesis emerged. Forum members' statements and comments about the forum, in postings and in the survey, often sent me in different directions. In this way, analyses have been shaped many times by members' meta-reflections on the forum. Therefore, to an extent, the meaning of the forum was co-constructed between the analyst and participants. Following such leads runs the risk of biasing the interpretation of the findings towards those who are most vocal. Overall, the analysis in this thesis is oriented towards active members, and the perceptions of those for whom the forum has meant *something*, whether this was negative, positive, or both.

## **Limitations of the study**

A few limitations can be identified beyond those already discussed. The initially broad approach to this study became both its weakness and its strength. More specific questions could emerge from previous mistakes and findings within the same study. On the other hand this was at the cost of more specialised research instruments. Fewer, more focused questions in the online survey might have yielded more complex and solid statistical results. An alternative approach could have been interviews for an in-depth account of members' experiences of the forum. Secondly, in regard to the analysis of posts, a more time-specific and contextualised approach to threads could have added another layer of understanding support processes. The internet history is fast and several 'generations' of users passed through the forum whilst the study was ongoing; ideas and trends varied across time. There were different types of users: old; new; prolific; vocal; subtle; domineering; quiet. Whilst this was recognised in the informal reading, and guided the recognition of themes, such shifts were never systematically explored. A different

study could contextualise threads in the forum-history, be more sensitive to 'who' is talking to better understand the effect of a message; as well as following members' development to further investigate the forum use and culture.

## Chapter Five: A forum to connect

In Chapter Three it was proposed that women may be supported by different intellectual and cognitive resources including additional discursive constructs on violence, and a space for support that is not connected to friends and family. This chapter explores the goal and history behind the creation of the forum from the perspective of the forum host; as well as the forum-members' own perspectives of the meaning and *experience* of the forum as a space for support. In addition, members' perception of *the impact* of the forum on their process of ending violence in their lives is discussed. That is, how useful the forum has been as a tool to come to terms with different topics addressed. A further purpose of this Chapter is to introduce the forum, providing a context for the chapters that follow analysing threads. Data from the online survey and from the two interviews are included: one with the forum 'moderator', the person in charge of forum moderation; and one with 'the manager' (Chapter Four).

The survey design included quantitative ratings of levels of support alongside qualitative and reflective elements which offered respondents space to elaborate. This chapter, therefore, locates the findings about perceived level of support/impact within a broader framework of how participants experience and make sense of such support. This is the first study to present empirical evidence on the use of online support on domestic violence from the perspective of the users. Thus, even though the statistical inferences from the survey were less robust than envisaged (Chapter Four), its original approach nonetheless provides a valuable contribution to research on online support for domestic violence.

Strikingly, women's responses were often unified and confirm previous research on online support forums in that they all stress the value of support by and from others who have similar experiences (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Høybye et al, 2005; Sullivan, 2003; Vilhauer, 2009). In this respect, the data presented do not hold surprises, but are in line with what are considered general benefits of online support groups. The data provided evidence for four different dimensions of support: the forum as a social network/community (Stommel, 2009); enacted support such as emotional support (Zrebiec & Jacobson, 2001); cognitive guidance (Mo & Coulson, 2010); and provision of information (Westbrook, 2007). However, these general features are complicated by the communal aspects of the forum and the importance of participation (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010; Marivel & Thombre, 2010; Sandaunet, 2008). These additional aspects raise questions about for whom and how the support is helpful, which will be examined in detail in this chapter.

Moreover, even when closeness within a formal support network creates tensions, it is here proposed that informal reflexive work in a virtual community on domestic violence can

successfully, and may preferably, coexist with professional guidance. This is important because of the dangerous reality women are facing in their lives, and the risks attached to exposing this publicly online.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Section one provides the background of the participants. Sections two and three explore the survey participants', and the interviewees' understanding of the social dynamic of the forum, the role of forum moderation, and links to formal support services. Sections four and five, report on specific impacts of participation (Chapter Four) such as learning about violence, seeking information, and taking action.

## Who participated

The survey results are based on responses by 70 participants who volunteered to complete the survey following a link from the message board. Not all participants answered all questions, so the base for each question is given when data are presented; the survey can be found in Appendix 2<sup>6</sup>. Two interviews were carried out: one with the manager; and one with the head of moderation of the forum. Both explored the interviewees' perceptions of the use of the forum; the forum's creation and development; moderation and challenges with the moderation (see Appendix 3 for interview guide).

The age of the respondents ranged within four age bands between 18 to 60 years with the largest group between 30 and 39 (Table 5.1) (Q3). Although these age bands do not allow an exact measurement of the distribution of age amongst respondents, the results indicate that the forum is populated by people in their 20s; 30s, 40s, as well as in their 50s.

*Table 5.1: Age of participants*

Age band	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
No of respondents	17	24	18	11

*N=70*

The majority of respondents (53 of 68) were white British, born and resident in the UK, the remaining 15 were also white but born in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia (Q4; Q5). Most were regular users (57 of 64) visiting the forum several times a week up to several times a day (Q13); and most (44 of 66) had both started threads and posted to others (Q14).

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<sup>6</sup> The number of the survey question is referred to as (Q + number) in text. For example, (Q3) means that the specific section is drawn from the data derived from question 3 in appendix 2.

Participants were in various situations when visiting the forum for the first time. Most (44 of 54) had signed up whilst in the process of ending violence<sup>7</sup> (Q43). Of these, 19 were still in the relationship; seven were in the process of ending an abusive relationship; and 15 arrived just after a breakup. In addition, three women were stalked and harassed by their partner after having ended the relationship. The remaining participants (10 of 54) first visited the forum six months or more after ending violence. This shows that women arrived at the forum with a range of experiences and support needs.

Findings are therefore biased towards regular users, i.e. those who were previously or currently well-immersed within the forum; and women who were in the middle of the process of ending violence. Regular users are more likely to have accepted the normative frame in the forum, and indeed they are likely to have been part of reproducing it (Chapter Three). Research also suggests that frequent users benefit from higher levels of emotional support (Mo & Coulson, 2010). Hence little is known about members who browse the site occasionally or only read other people's posts.

## **A space for mutual support**

The forum had been created a few years before the administration of the survey and the interviews in an effort to expand service provision. From this pragmatic beginning it has grown rapidly. At the time of the research around 3000 members were registered and an average of five new members was signing up each day. The forum developed organically - rules, regulations, moderation policy, and the user interface were responses to issues raised within the forum - and a particular style of support provision emerged.

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<sup>7</sup> Question 34 in the survey - Which of the following best described your situation when you first came to the forum? (Given alternatives: experiencing abuse; was in the process of ending an abusive relationship; had just ended an abusive relationship; was dealing with consequences of abuse that ended 6 months or more before I joined the forum; had never experienced abuse; Something else, please tell me) – was reconsidered during the later stage of the study. When looking at ending violence as a nonlinear process (see Chapter 3), the alternatives above may overlap and be difficult to distinguish. For example, the alternative ‘experiencing abuse’ in the context of a support forum is likely to be part of ‘a process of ending violence’, and also likely to happen after having ‘just ended an abusive relationship’. Therefore, in the analysis, all alternatives except ‘was dealing with consequences of abuse that ended 6 months or more before I joined the forum’ and ‘had never experienced abuse’ were counted as being *in the process of ending violence*. The different alternatives within this now broader category were used as descriptions. Responses to the last alternative ‘Something else, please tell me’ could be located within one of the given categories.

For the hosts the forum's main purpose was to create a space where 'survivors' could support 'survivors' and talk about their situations in a different way: that is to say define it in their own words.

I think the most important thing is survivors supporting survivors, it is very much their forum, and, as moderators we would only post a message if a woman directly asks for information or if a member is at particular high risk... But in general it really is about survivors supporting survivors and they get so much from that, it is amazing to watch actually. As professionals we don't want to dominate it, we just, we want them to support each other. and that is why we are very strict about allowing other professionals go on there, we don't allow any professionals. We had requests from police officers, social workers, and help professionals who have been watching the forum and are desperate to go there and actually offer advice, and we say no (The moderator).

Thus, central to the practice of the forum is that members are primarily the supporters, with the forum host resisting initiatives which could change the non-hierarchical, experiential setting.

Having experiences of both types of support provision, interviewees observed the difference between how women interacted with each other in the forum and when communicating with more formal support workers. In the forum members were perceived to be more honest and disclose more. It was proposed by both interviewees that women felt freer and more protected in an anonymous social context than when talking to someone face-to-face or via phone. This was also confirmed in survey responses.

### Shared experience and emotional safety

When survey participants elaborated more freely on the meaning of the forum in open-ended questions, the most prominent theme was the significance of shared experience, how this was linked to being understood, and to an emotionally safe environment. One question asked members to compare the support received in the forum with other support received outside of it (Q24). Overall, 49 of 55 responses gave a positive assessment that could be conceptualised in five intertwined themes: a connection to others with similar experiences; a non-judgmental environment; high level of engagement and empathy; the availability/immediacy of the medium; receiving multiple and different responses.

#### *Experiential knowledge means being understood*

Members appreciated most having people to talk to who had similar experiences (26 of 55). In particular, this was linked to *being understood* and expanding one's own *understanding* by being helped to put problems into words (see below). Knowing that others 'knew too' enabled expression of emotions and disclosures about violence.

Domestic abuse is not a topic that you can easily talk about to people that are close to you. Talking to the other ladies on the forum has some days become a lifeline without embarrassment. Without being

asked why you stay. Without judgement. With genuine concern. Everyone on there is at a different stage in coming to terms with what happens, everyone listens, everyone cares- No one judges. I read the posts for months before I finally had the courage to post, the warmth and support from everyone has been amazing' (*Participant 69, age-band 40-49*)

It helps hearing from people who have been there and are there, I feel like there is a bond, even though we'll never meet, purely because we've all been through traumatic experiences, rather than speaking to someone without personal experience of it. There's an overwhelming sense of people wanting to help each other, unconditionally. (*Participant 14, age-band 18-29*)

The ability to share stories and experiences has been offered as one of the common reasons why people use online support groups (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Finn & Lavitt, 1994; Høybye et al, 2005; Salem et al, 1997; Vilhauer, 2009) and is argued to have empowering effects (Barak, 2008). Moreover, 'experiential knowledge' (Borkman, 1999) is one of the major aspects of the technology of mutual support, and the reason why people seek mutual support (Chapter Three).

#### *A non-judgmental environment*

Seventeen respondents wrote about the value of being understood by people who had 'been there'. This was often combined with the value of the forum as being less judgemental. As the response below exemplifies, non-judgmental responses are expected, and another's understanding can be reached from at least one of the thousands of women online.

You can be totally open and honest and know you will not be judged and at least one other member will understand how you're feeling (*Participant 54, age-band 18-29*)

In addition, five women pointed out that forum members were *more empathic* and engaged than others. How other people respond to disclosures of domestic violence can make the difference between being a stepping stone towards ending violence and an obstacle to women's help-seeking (Chapter Three). The significance of a social space that is non-judgmental parallels findings about women often choosing to speak to a female friend first, and preferably someone with similar experiences (Klein 2012; Patton 2003).

#### *Accessibility*

Thirteen respondents stressed the immediacy and accessibility of the online environment as being what distinguished the forum from other forms of support. Most appreciated having access to support at all times, the immediacy of writing, and that it was 'always there'. Others pointed out the limited access to other support highlighting that the process of ending violence is ongoing, and does not follow the timelines of office hours and occasional appointments for counselling. The forum was also deemed more approachable, and thus facilitated building confidence to access other support.

The only other support that relates closely to the forum is my counsellor. But I have a limited number of sessions with her and she is not available at any time. One can go on the forum at any

time and there is always someone somewhere in the world who will reply. (*Participant 31, age-band 50-59*)

This is the only support I have felt strong enough to access yet and it is making me feel inspired and empowered - I am going to start accessing more support and am planning to leave and feel this forum is giving me the confidence and support to move forward. (*Participant 25, age-band 40-49*)

Research on social support has found that the perception of available support can be more important than actual actions (Thoits, 1995), which underlines the advantage of having consistent and easy access to the forum. ‘Knowing it is there’ may restore a sense of security that was lacking in some of the women’s lives. Moreover, Suler (2004) argues that the ability to leave and return at will to an online site enhances emotional safety and contributes to increased self-disclosure. A final theme revealed that four members also valued receiving multiple responses rather than just one perspective from a support worker. Only two said that the support was ‘bad’ or not actually supportive without elaborating on this, and for five participants the forum was their only support, which they could not compare to anything else.

### A space for disclosure?

Eight questions in the survey measured solidarity and the quality of communication, which are considered the foundations of emotional support (Weber & Patterson, 1996) (in questions Q21 and Q22). An individual’s ability to express emotions and feelings depends to some extent on personal characteristics and past experiences, but is also connected to the reception of emotional talk by other people (Klein, 2012; Patterson & Weber, 1996). This is a key factor for a space where sharing experiences, emotions, feelings, and ideas are the main activities. All questions could be answered on a Likert scale from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true). Considering that the forum was framed above as an emotional safe space in which to be understood and reach understanding, a high average rating was expected. Actual ratings qualified this hypothesis. Table 5.2 and Table 5.3 show findings for member’s ability to talk on the message board about problems and feelings. For example, letting off steam was easier (M=4.3, n=57) than disclosing personal details (M=3.59, n=59) (Table 5.2), although both mean values are high.

*Table 5.2: Expressing feelings in the forum (I)*

The forum is a place where I can "let off steam" about emotions/problems	Mean=4.3, n =57
I find it very easy to discuss personal feelings and private details of my life in the forum	Mean=3.59, n = 59

However, when the questions were turned around it is evident that some women also found it hard to express negative feelings (M= 1.96, n=57), in particular when they perceived that others were worse off (M= 2.8, n=60) (Table 5.3).

*Table 5.3: Expressing feelings (II)*

I don't feel able to express how sad, depressed or negative I feel when writing in the forum	Mean=1.96, n =57
I feel uncomfortable sharing stories and negative emotions when many others in the forum seem to be 'worse off'	Mean= 2.8, n= 60

These findings may reflect the general difficulty of expressing negative feelings whether this is in an internet forum or elsewhere, and the risks of disclosing personal details in a public space (discussed further below). However, the second statement provides another reading - that some women felt obliged to give more space to those they perceived as needing the support more. This is one of the consequences of mutual support - women are both support seekers and helpers and roles are constantly switching. That said, indicating that it is uncomfortable to take space when others seems to need it more, may also be the social desirable response which could have raised the score. Finally, this result may indicate that some women do not perceive that they are victimised enough, i.e. that their personal stories do not fit a dominant narrative of victimisation and therefore feel uncomfortable sharing their stories. This has been observed in a support forum on breast-cancer (Sandaunet, 2008).

Three additional questions in Table 5.4 relevant for emotional support ask whether supporters could be counted on when needed, and their genuine care and engagement.

*Table 5.4: Level of engagement and care from others*

There is always someone in the forum to listen	Mean= 4.30, n =57
Forum members are genuinely concerned about my problems	Mean= 4.42, n =55
People listen to me and what I write and answer on the basis of that	Mean= 4.35, n =55

The high mean values above suggest that participants found the support reliable, personal, relevant, and honest, which suggests that members did not simply write standard answers but responded to the specifics of each post.

The results presented so far concur with previous research on user satisfaction with OSGs which finds high levels of empathy and emotional support (see for example Zrebiec & Jacobson, 2001). Research on anonymous computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers explanations

for why people often find it easier to disclose problems in anonymous settings online that resonates with the overall findings here (Joinson, 2007). Immediate reactions of others such as possible facial disapproval are not shown (Suler 2004). The few visible signs of cultural, physical, class and individual diversity in invisible CMC settings often create a perception of increased similarity between people, and emphasise collective identities which may be the most important factor in whether a person feels they belong to an online forum (Lea et al, 2001; Walther, 2011). In addition, there are signs that the collective intense focus and communication around a common problem in the forum resulted in a sense of community.

### A community?

Interviewees were surprised by the level of friendships that had developed - both played out on the message board, and sometimes extended to offline settings. Supporting previous research (Bauer et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2012), comments revealed that for many women the forum was more than transactions of support between strangers but contributed to new friendships. This form of social dynamic online is supportive and comforting beyond specific advice and actions; it helps to remove a sense of isolation by becoming a form of networking (Gold et al., 2012).

One open ended question asked what aspect of the forum participants appreciated the most (Q46). Together with the support itself, the most frequent responses (34 of 53) indicated that the forum was more than *a medium* that connected people, rather it was *a space* to inhabit - to spend time in, share experiences, build friendships, be accepted, and be part of a collective effort between women to help each other.

Women coming together to be there for each other (*Participant 11, age-band 30-39*)

A place to go where I can talk freely about my inner most feelings without feeling like people will judge me or think I'm crazy. A place where people understand and CARE. (*Participant 22, age-band 30-39*)

Just being there! (*Participant 21, age-band 50-59*)

Camaraderie - feeling of bonding and empathy with people who genuinely understand and are nonjudgemental. Also the opportunity to discuss personal issues anonymously which I have not been able to do with anyone else. (*Participant 25, age-band 40-49*)

Created great friendships on this forum and we now keep in touch outside of it, and these women are my full support (*Participant 11, age-band 30-39*)

Moreover, when asking directly how members *felt* after having spent time in the forum, 28 women responded, with some mentioning several feelings (Q53). Twelve women felt not alone but part of a group/community; nine women felt supported/empowered; seven felt relieved; four felt engaged in others' lives.

Accepted, understood, valued, not alone, part of a group, strong, supported (*Participant 51, age-band 18-29*).

When I get responses I really feel part of an important group, like a sort of belonging. If I don't get any responses then I don't want to be part of it, but I always come back. (*Participant 33, age-band 40-49*)

It feels good to be part of a community and to be able to both give and receive support. (*Participant 12, age-band 50-59*)

I actually feel happier if that makes any sense, lifted I suppose as though I have some purpose. (*Participant 34, age-band 40-49*)

I forget my own situation. (*Participant 70, age-band 40-49*)

Free (*Participant 40, age-band 40-49*)

Here, some women specifically named the forum a 'community' or 'an important group'. Once again, the forum as a virtual social space seemed to encourage feelings of empowerment (Kasturirangan, 2008) ('free', 'uplifted', 'supported', 'strong') through a sense of belonging and of being useful to others. Perceived available emotional support presented in Table 5.2 can thus both be explained by the accessibility of the medium, the large number of supporters, but also on developing trust based on reciprocity and friendship. However, social groupings and their boundaries are more obvious in responses reflecting perceived social exclusion as discussed below.

#### *Making a social investment*

It is widely recognised that abuse has a negative impact on self-esteem (Chapter Three). The manager feared that women who could not engage with other users may have negative self-perceptions reinforced or confirmed. Factors that may influence the level of interaction with others include communication skills, writing skills, and English skills. Members who were able to articulate well in writing tended to have more connections and received more responses.

When asked if there had been days or situations when they had felt excluded, almost half of the sample (23 of 56) confirmed that this had happened on at least one occasion (Q28). Women explained this feeling as a result of two things: seven had felt left out, or less important, when they received no or few responses to their posts; although the most common reason (n=13) was intimidation, since some members had strong ties and appeared to be selective about whom they responded to.

When my posts have gone unanswered it made me feel like no one cared, it probably seemed trivial to others and they had many things going on or because I was in no immediate danger that others post took priority over mine and that my post sank down the list & was unnoticed (*Participant 66, age-band 18-29*).

Not so much excluded, but a little left out (*Participant 32, age-band 30-39*).

Sometimes there are long ongoing threads that seem to dominate the forum and smaller issues or fears from others can be overlooked. Direct posts to people can make you feel an outsider (*Participant 48, age-band 40-49*).

These responses also suggest that it requires time and effort to become part of the communal aspect of the forum, and not everyone has enough time/space to build such relationships. Some had become aware of the necessity of making a social investment.

When threads are directed to certain members who have obviously got to know each other a bit better. Unfortunately due to limited safe time to post I do not always have time to post and to make these friendships (*Participant 15, age-band 18-29*).

Some members that have been on the forum for longer have stronger relationships, which I think is to be expected, I am looking forward to forming such myself. Not in order to make others feel excluded, just to make friends, of course (*Participant 29, age-band 18-29*).

Strong bonds were both helpful when disclosing difficult experiences and an inevitable consequence of having done this.

When there was a bit of a fall out with one of the girls on there because she had a rant about not getting enough messages, to her post, and didn't like the fact that others got more replies, as she implied that we were all clique, and ignoring her. But what she didn't seem to realise is that some of us had been on the forum since it began a couple of years ago, and it's hard not to have an affinity with others when you have laid your whole life out on a forum... the bonds are very strong and some lifelong friends have been forged (*Participant 26, age-band 50-59*).

Thus, the constellations within the forum have an impact on perceived levels of support. The general comments in the earlier section about the forum feeling like a community/real group-some women said writing was 'like talking to a friend', i.e. treated the community as a single person-clearly need qualification. The mode and frequency in which support is received/offered depends in part on the history of forum engagement, on significant forum members, and on groups/dynamics that evolve over time. This highlights a difference with formal support, which is based on routines and policies. In order to benefit from support that is derived through reciprocity and friendship, a level of investment may be necessary. Individual differences, frequency of forum use, and background can impact whether such an investment is possible or desired.

Investment and participation are deemed important for a sense of togetherness amongst people in a community (McMillan, 1986). One study found that a 'sense of community' online depends on whether members: had learnt to recognise other members' individual style; had created an identity online; had built community-based relationships; and felt a certain level of obligation to help others (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Moreover, in an anonymous setting with seemingly

few ways to ascertain authenticity, people rely more on reputation and performance over time to develop trust (Henderson & Gilding, 2004), which gives importance and purpose to the development of in-groups and friendships. Thus, grouping and close friendships may affect inclusion/exclusion yet are at the same time one of the supportive dynamics of the forum.

These findings are interesting to contrast with a recent study by Lindgren (2014), who concluded that tight knit groups of established members were essential for the delivery of support, since it was they who provided most encouragement and emotional support, whilst new members or occasional writers were not able to “give” as much even though they needed and received support. In this study some ‘downsides’ of this were found, with the ‘tight-knittedness’ intimidating some less integrated members. Although the exact role of the tight-knitted groups in this forum is unclear, the findings suggest that seeking and maintaining friendships is a draw to the forum. The social benefits of integration may contribute to such members having more “to give”, alongside developing ‘experiential expertise’ (Borkman, 1999) in giving appropriate advice. Thus, again, whilst this may be essential for the quality of the forum, it at the same time can be intimidating for newer members.

Taken together, for many women in the sample the forum represents a connection to other women with similar experiences and backgrounds, either as a consistent source of support that extended and complemented other forms of support, and/or as a community and social network. As the moderator pointed out at the beginning of this section, the foundation of the support is members’ participation (‘survivors’ supporting ‘survivors’), a social pursuit that can give rise to all sorts of feelings, groupings and actions. One important aspect of this forum was that it is moderated, and in a particular way.

## **The role of moderation and links to formal support**

The moderator observed that the forum was a link to the outside world for women who did not receive any other support. This is partly reflected in survey responses. When asked how the respondents had learnt about the forum, the majority (56 of 68) had found the forum as part of an attempt to seek help and/or information about domestic violence on the internet (Q11). Two questions also asked about what forms of support they had accessed before and during engagement in the forum (Q8; Q9). For eight women the forum had been the only support they had accessed; six women had accessed other types of support – police, help-lines, and support workers – after engagement in the forum.

Therefore, for most women - 54 of 68 participants - the forum was one of many forms of support they had accessed. Forty-two had accessed domestic violence support services. In addition, the forum in itself has elements of formal support: it is hosted by an organisation that

provides services for women who are seeking to end violence, and the forum is moderated by trained support workers.

## The role of the moderators

The work of the moderators took a different form than support provided by members. Interviewees described the work of the moderators in detail. The manager explained how being the ones establishing the forum rules, protecting the forum boundaries and members' safety, the moderators need to seek as be fair to everyone. To distinguish themselves from members, the moderators' style of writing was also different, more formal, and all moderators shared a single online identity. This differentiation between moderators and the service users was considered essential. Although, getting the tone right - professional yet warm - was a challenge. The main task was to 'keep everything together' and 'watch' conversations. A considerable amount of support work was carried out including moderation three times daily (around five hours in total), and weekly meetings to keep everyone updated on the recent developments and issues amongst the members. Moderators' key tasks were: keeping the message board safe (more on this later); providing information and links to formal support; monitoring conversations; provide guidance (referrals) to members who were in acute situations; interacting and welcoming new members; having discussions about child protection issues; clarifying uncertainties regarding procedures. In addition, although disagreements were often productive, on occasion, complete threads were removed. A few members had been blocked - a response to repeated breaching of rules, and abusive comments towards other members, and/or the moderators. Whilst members in need were referred to formal support as a basic policy, moderators also occasionally carried out support on a one-to-one basis via email.

We have had various discussions, I had with [The moderator] for example about, where we should draw the line, because there have been incidents where the women email the moderators, which they can do, about their situation, and we don't want it to turn into a case-work service, we can't!

(k) Ok, so, where do you draw the line?

As a policy we always try to help women engage with services, whether that is calling a help-line, whether that is giving information to local services, or whatever... I have always been supportive to helping women, and there has been incidents where there has been an email exchange with a moderator, and that has been about giving her information about local services, about helping her escape, and that is how far we go really. There was a point when it was beginning to be more that and we had to help the moderators be clearer to set the boundaries about what type of support they could provide. We are not doing case-work, and we cannot claim to, so we are not helping the women at all by dipping in and out of that, so we have to help women to engage with services... but yeah, it is a difficult one to navigate (The manager).

Whilst the forum was fundamentally a space for mutual support-'survivors' helping 'survivors'- the boundaries had to be reconfirmed because some members wanted more from the moderators. This supportive structure of the forum appears to be systematically set-up and reflects the ongoing ethical responsibilities Women's Aid takes for women's safety. To say that mutual support overlapped with professional support may be an overstatement, but there are certainly strong links between the two, as will be demonstrated below; the members counted on moderators to take the primary responsibility in cases of immediate danger.

## Respondents on the role of the moderators

Overall, the moderators' contribution and presence in the forum was welcomed and seen as a necessity by the great majority of the respondents. Fifty of 58 respondents rated moderators' responses as being almost always or often informative and supportive (Q22). When asked how important the moderator was, respondents' list of tasks mirrored the one outlined above by the forum host (Q25).

Very important, there are lots of questions that only a moderator can really answer, and when you can't use the telephone it's extremely important (*Participant 18, age-band 30-39*).

She does always point new members to needed services, take over when there are threats of suicide and act as a direct email point for people in real need (*Participant 51, age-band 18-29*).

The welcome from the moderator was really important. I was feeling really vulnerable and didn't know if I was in the right place. I was made to feel valid (*Participant 48, age-band 40-49*).

Some also welcomed a professional perspective as a counterbalance to the highly emotional/personal responses. In addition, one question queried whether members thought there should be additional input from the moderator (Q26). Thirteen of 56 did, citing: a more personal viewpoint; more one-to-one support; more consistency and clearer criteria for when moderators respond; more professional guidance and expertise; more posts in general from clearly distinguished moderators. Taken together, in contrast to the emphasis on mutual support above, some members sought more professional-led support. This indicates different uses of the forum: those who primarily were there for the peer-led support alongside members who either had not yet entered the community-based social dynamics, or were seeking professional advice and information.

Overall, the whole sample trusted the moderators as representing a professional viewpoint, although with a hands-off approach, and providing guidance if necessary. Only a couple of women were indifferent to the moderators' presence. All women can be assumed to have arrived at the forum because they needed support, and, although finding it satisfying and empowering to be an engaged supporter, the responsibility for guiding others through complicated acute situations was shared with professionals. Thus, alongside being a space for mutual support and a

community, the forum is also under constant supervision and is facilitated and structured by support workers who offer pathways to formal help. Ultimately, then, for women the forum meant a space that was both separate from, and connected to, a broader structure of support.

### Safe guarding in a public anonymous forum

Research from the UK and the US describes the different ways in which domestic violence victims/survivors have employed online resources to access community services, information, referral and advocacy (Davenport et al, 2008; Finn, 2000; Finn & Atkinson, 2008; Kranz, 2002; Rothman et al, 2009; Van Schaik et al, 2010). Three broad categories of potential risks with internet resources have been identified: lost anonymity, victimisation and misinformation (Finn & Atkinson, 2008). For example, some users are unaware that everyone can read posts in public spaces online, so they discuss private information openly that becomes accessible to everyone. Many lack knowledge on how to hide traces of online activity on a shared computer in the woman's home. By tracking the victim's whereabouts and activities via the internet, perpetrators have the possibility to continue the abuse online or the situation may worsen offline (Finn & Atkinson, 2008).

#### *Respondents' perception of the public and anonymous setting*

Although most women (40 of 68) responded positively to the question of whether they were comfortable with the forum as an anonymous space, for some this was a source of concern (Q29). When asked whether participants felt safe using the forum, more than half (35 of 65) did not always feel safe, with 26 specifying they were afraid of their use being tracked by the abusive partner (Q17). A more direct question - 'has anything made you feel anxious?' - revealed that 31 of 65 women had been anxious and uncomfortable on at least one occasion with respect to their safety (Q27).

When some of the stories seem too farfetched, Gut instinct makes you recoil... and back off or avoid replying to certain threads (*Participant 26, age-band 50-59*).

The fact that anyone can register using false details and there MUST be, by the law of averages, men on there and people who are not there for the right reasons. The fact it is totally open and surely if you are computer literate it would occur to a lot of abusers to search there for women (*Participant 30, age-band 40-49*).

Sometimes I'd like to discuss more personal stuff but it's hard because the more personal the easier it would be to identify me. Prob I'm being paranoid but it wouldn't be that hard to make out it was me if my ex was reading stuff. So I haven't posted a lot of stuff that's happened because he'd only have to read it and know it was me (*Participant 52, age-band 30-39*).

Two women reported an actual incident when anonymity was breached. In this way, the public nature of the forum constituted a limit for certain conversations. On the other hand, these

findings demonstrate that women were aware of the risks and worked to protect their anonymity. This fear of being ‘found’ when exposing intimate and emotionally charged information highlights the importance of ongoing moderation and justifies some of the limitations placed on participation.

#### *Moderators’ ‘safety-work’*

The moderators undertook daily ‘safety-work’ (Kelly et al, 2014) to protect members’ anonymity and to keep the forum a safe space. Every message needed to be read by moderators. All posts from unauthorized people, details which could identify someone’s identity or whereabouts were removed, alongside any information about ongoing court cases, although some women had been able to use posts in court as evidence. On a few occasions, the forum had been infiltrated by perpetrators who had written offensive posts, upset members and created anxiety. Some members had had partners who figured out login details and asked to have their posts removed, which the moderators could only do to a certain extent.

A different challenge was how to respond to women who were in clear risk when children were involved.

A real challenge is safeguarding issues on there. Women who are telling horrendous stories and the details at times have shown that children are at risk, is really quite scary, but any safeguarding position you may have within a service is a completely different online because you don’t know who she is or where she is,- within services we have policies that if children are clearly at risk of harm, then that would breach confidentiality and would be made clear to service users, but... that is really tricky online! (*The Manager*)

The anonymous setting also changed the premises for safeguarding, although, in this case, it gave the members more freedom to disclose without risking further consequences. Overall, the risks that have been discussed in this section are in contrast to the emotional safety previously explored, which confirms the complex, multiple roles of the moderators. Moderators with specific training conducted a great amount of work behind the scenes as well as visibly on the message-board to provide a safe platform for members to support themselves. In this way, moderators pursued the balancing act of creating a supportive structure without being overly involved in the support practices.

#### *Tensions in safe space*

There are examples of when the combination of formal and informal support is less successful. The forum host delineates the scope of the content: discussions that deal with self-experienced violence rather than on behalf of a friend or family member. Enforcing such rules was prompted by the priority to help women in need.

We have moderated threads that are this long [showing with her hand] and they are not even talking about domestic violence, so, we have to, there is a fine line. We are flexible to a point but if it is

taking a lot of our time moderating then I think what we are doing is, there are also other things going on that is serious stuff, it takes away time from the moderators, so, that would be the reason why we would discourage them from doing it. But I do understand the need for them to be light hearted and talk about things differently, of course that is part of the recovery (*The Moderator*)

From the perspective of the forum host, the focus should be on ending violence and moving on. Extensive theorising about violence and why the abuser is abusive was also deemed unhelpful. Despite moderators' efforts to find a balance, and although the reason behind restrictions was also the limited moderation time set by the available budget, there was resistance amongst some of the members. Across four different open ended questions (how important is the moderator? (Q25); what can the moderator do less of? (Q26); does anything make you anxious? (Q27); Have you ever felt excluded? (Q28) a minority reported that they had felt censured in different ways by the moderators. Eight participants in eleven comments argued for less strict enforcement of rules and an expansion of what counted as relevant.

Initially I was a bit upset when told I could post about my experiences but not ask how I could support my daughter but I do understand the forum needs to keep focused. I have noticed other people asking for advice about friends/family appear to get "shut down" and I think it would be helpful to have a bit more on the site/forum for them too as I know from bitter experience how difficult it is to know what to do for the best. (...) I would like help for from the point of view of survivors. What would they like their families to do. What support has been most valuable to them. But I have been told I can't. Surely an occasional thread wouldn't take over the forum. (*Participant 31, age-band 50-59*)

It is good there's someone to uphold the rules - at one stage there was a lot of swearing and it needed to be stopped so it was. But equally I've seen more jokey threads be stifled because they're deemed a little risqué and honestly sometimes all we want is to laugh and feel normal. (*Participant 51, age-band 18-39*)

Keeping the forum focused on ending violence may validate the common goal between members, and prioritise women in urgent need. On the other hand, some members who had invested in building a sense of community wished to explore friendships they had developed. Thus, whilst an online community, dependent on mutual support, friendships and trust, needs space to maintain the social relationships and to build new ones, the forum hosts' goal stemmed from their framework to primarily help survivors to end violence. Previous research on other topics found that collision of different ideas of support often leads to conflicts (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010). The next part of the chapter focuses on the forum's impact on help-seeking.

## **Learning a new perspective on violence**

Qualitative and quantitative responses to six questions provide evidence that reflexive work in the forum had facilitated a shift in how women understood violence and their decision making.

## What can be said and talked about?

When asked whether the forum addressed different aspects of support or discussed issues not talked about elsewhere, the majority (46 of 67) agreed, and specifically mentioned: emotions such as guilt, love; affection for children; sexuality and sexual abuse (Q23). However, when asking the opposite question whether there was anything they would hesitate to write about five women wrote sexual abuse and three the impact of abuse on children (Q32). Clearly both are sensitive areas: the former because sexual abuse often happens in the grey zone of what is deemed a criminal act (Chapter Six and Frith & Kitzinger, 1998); the latter because mothers are often made responsible for harm to children (Morris, 2009). One participant proposed that sexual abuse is better addressed in a specialised forum or a more closed space that entailed less fear of being exposed. Here, the limits of disclosure were largely due to the public space of the internet, and the risks connected to it. One woman wrote that posts addressing her female abusive partner had not been responded to. Even if no conclusions can be drawn from one example, it suggests a heteronormative framing within the forum.

When exploring these limits and the possibilities of conversations, once again shared experience was framed as offering more openness and honesty in discussion.

It's hard to talk to people who have not had a similar experience. They just don't 'get it'. They don't understand why he is such an ass and why you are suffering from incredible anxiety - how the whole situation goes on and on and on. So it was nice to be able to talk to people on the forum, who know exactly what you are feeling - that the feelings are complex and the solution is not straight forward. It was like connecting with people on a subliminal level. You can share stories and feelings that frighten your friends and family because the people on the forum are not frightened of your truth. They can see you with their eyes and they don't mind. They not trying to shut you up, and sweep your experience under the carpet. Some things are too difficult to share with people you see face to face (*Participant 65, age-band 30-39*).

The closing down when someone becomes embarrassed or distressed was contrasted to the space offered by the forum where women's experiences or feelings were not diminished or minimised, and the complexity of women's lives was recognised, contrary to the reactions of people who expect women to leave at the first slap (Enander, 2009), or blame women for violence (this will be explored further in Chapters Seven and Eight).

## What was learned?

Two questions asked to what extent the participants had learned about violence on the message-board: both in terms of how to make sense of violence (Q30); and more specifically their definition of violence (Q31). Participants could both give a rating between 1 (not useful at all/to a little extent) and 4 (very useful/to a great extent), and elaborate on their ratings in the open ended part of the question (see below). Strikingly, 41 out of 54 respondents perceived that the

forum had facilitated their process of understanding violence very much (M=3.65) (Q30), and 38 had altered their definition of abuse to a great extent (M=3.46, n=54) (Q31).

Moreover, to further explore the focus of discussions on violence in the forum, a third question asked participants to freely recall a particular insight that was gained through the forum (Q33). Open-ended responses from all three questions (30, 31, 33; 54 respondents) overlapped, and five themes emerged: recognition; validation/affirmation; self-blame; that violence is common; help options.

#### *Recognition: forms of violence*

Twenty-seven respondents stressed the discovery of many forms of abuse, control and subtle forms of manipulation. In particular, 'naming' *emotional abuse* as a harmful and serious form of violence enabled many to see themselves as abused. Others went a step further and described how patterns in other women's stories had revealed complexities and connections for themselves.

I had no idea, I thought it was all about violence, now I understand it is so much more... Even though I suffered sexual, verbal and emotional abuse regularly, I assumed that because I didn't live with my partner and he wasn't regularly violent, it wasn't domestic violence. I believed to be a victim of domestic violence you had to be seriously physically assaulted, and probably be living with that person. It's made me realise that so many other negative behaviour patterns constitute dv as well (Participant 67, age-band 30-39).

Several women emphasised the importance of talking about less obvious elements of an abusive relationship, and their responses and adaptations to violence. This unveiled the extent to which their life had been focused on avoiding abuse, finding excuses or explanations for actions that had no justification. Some women mentioned that they had gained understanding of why they had stayed for so long, and that ending violence is a long process.

#### *More common than you think*

Twenty-three women reported that finding resemblance between experiences had helped them feel less alone in the situation and make sense of it. In addition, this realisation was often linked to insight into the prevalence of domestic violence more generally - that it is common and can happen to anyone.

Other people have been through the EXACT same things and are having the EXACT same reactions. It makes me feel human and realise that i am not going insane (Participant 22, age-band 30-39).

That domestic violence is not specific to one group or type of people (Participant 13, age-band 50-5).

It's opened my eyes to how common it is, it's made me realise it really can affect anyone, anywhere (Participant 14, age-band 18-29).

That so many women had experienced the same things gave significance to their abuse, and that

it was reasonable to expect something different from the relationship.

### *Self-blame and victim-blaming*

Although this was not asked about specifically in the survey, the realisation that 'it is not my fault' was expressed 20 times in different places in the responses.

It's made me realise that it's not my fault. That I am not the only person it happens to. That this isn't how everyone lives their lives (*Participant 69, age-band 40-49*).

Although not always elaborated, a few respondents explained how they had come to this realisation: first, by naming the 'subtleties' of abuse, and by realising that self-blame was a common feeling amongst women who had been abused. Others linked feelings of blame to other peoples' victim-blaming of them, a realisation that had enabled a more positive identity.

### *Validation/affirmation*

For eighteen participants writing about violence had affirmed and validated their experiences as serious and unacceptable. Reading other people's stories helped to understand their own experiences of violence and abuse, that it was real and not only in their head.

It has been confirmed by a large number of users that I am living with a perpetrator and experiencing quite significant abuse (*Participant 15, age-band 18-29*).

This happened when their personal story could be recognised in someone else's, or when other women directly validated their story.

### *There is help*

Nine women had discovered the many legal and formal strategies in place to respond to violence and protect women. On critical reflection, others found such strategies insufficient to meet women's needs.

The court process and all the legal issues related to dealing with DV and keeping ladies and their children safe. (*Participant 5, age-band 18-29*).

The attitude of police and social care to women brave enough to speak out is disgusting and needs to stop. Lack of care and respect by them and the courts exacerbates the suffering of the victims and children. Misogyny is alive and well in England in the spectrum of dealing with dv (*Participant 2, age-band 40-49*)

For members in this sample, it was understanding the complexity of violence that drew the most enthusiastic comments about the process of learning through the forum. Some also seemed eager to raise awareness of domestic violence more broadly, confirming the community-based engagement described above.

To return to the question at the beginning of this chapter - whether the forum could provide a space for different perspectives and resources - it is evident that the forum is employed for

meaning-making. Within the theoretical framework of this thesis (Chapter Two) the exchange and validation of shared experience was the premise for extending knowledge. The recurrence of the same insights and revelations about violence - control, manipulation, forms of violence – reveal a dominant discursive perspective through which the experiences are interpreted. This is explored in more depth in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

## Impact on actions

One of the most significant aspects of the survey data involved how forum members perceived that the reflexive work they undertook in the forum had had an impact on help seeking.

### Finding information

Members used the forum as a source of information on how to access and engage with formal support. First, when members were asked to rate the quality of information on the forum between 1 (very low) and 5 (very high), the mean value 4.34 (n=53) indicated that participants believed they would find accurate information through the forum (Q45). Two more specified questions revealed that the forum was a useful place to find information about support services and legal issues (Table 5.5) (Q36).

*Table 5.5: Ratings of the forum as a source of information*

Finding DV support services	Mean=3.80, n=46
Finding information about legal rights, e.g. bringing criminal charges or, child custody	Mean=3.65, n=46

Westbrook’s (2007) content analysis unveiled five broad information needs expressed in an OSG on domestic violence including finances, law, mental health, information on domestic violence and logistics. Similarly, findings from this research strengthen the conclusions that online support is an indirect pathway to accessing and managing formal support.

### Taking action

When asked to recall specific actions/decisions that had been influenced by their activity in the forum, thirty-three of 46 respondents recalled having taken further steps to seek help: contacting the police, help-lines, local support services, speaking to friends or family (Q37). Others had taken specific steps to end violence: documented abuse; followed through a legal case, or reduced contact to a minimum with an ex-partner after encouragement from other members and/or the moderator.

One question specifically enquired whether the forum had influenced them to take action to end

violence (Q39). Twelve of the 15 members who had ended the relationship since finding the forum reported that it had. In particular the notions that 'this will never change' had made an impact: six women noted that the forum had 'shattered their illusions', helped them 'see it for what it was', made them realise that one cannot 'fix the unfixable'. For two it had helped to see the decision through, and one had realised that help was available.

From reading the forum and other websites and books etc. linked to from the forum I have come to realise that it is extremely unlikely that my situation will change, that my boyfriend will change. The only way to end the abuse is to end the relationship - that's an opinion that the forum has directly influenced (*Participant 19, age-band 30-39*).

It is important to note that visiting the forum is in itself part of a broader process of ending violence. Thus, the specific influence of the forum may have been part of a trajectory already in place.

However, influence was sometimes framed as pressure. When asked directly if they had felt pressure to end the relationship seven of 46 answered that they had (Q35). In addition, 12 of 56 women had felt uncomfortable and anxious when the tone of members' responses was strongly opinionated (Q27). A few thought that members were too focused on 'leaving' as the only way to end violence.

They said to leave him. I know it was the right thing to do, and I was trying to do it. He might change - I know I am naive to think that, but some men do (*Participant 3, age-band 30-39*).

I am still in my abusive relationship and I am struggling to accept and really believe this. I have been told, very strongly, that I need to leave straight away. I do not feel able to leave right now but I am afraid of posting again in case members judge me and pressure me even more. I do not feel that everyone is as understanding or accepting of other peoples' choices and situations. I would also be afraid of admitting how hard I am finding things because I feel that I would get the response along the lines of: just leave him then. Which I have received in the past and found very upsetting because it is not that easy! (*Participant 15, age-band 18-29*)

Although these comments represent a small minority, they raise questions as to how far the forum is non-judgmental. It is also unclear how many of the people who are only reading messages perceive the support to be strongly normative and hence remain invisible in the background. Nevertheless, these concerns need to be placed in the context of the many participants who welcomed messages that sought to "shatter illusions", seeing them as a form of encouragement to end violence. Online forums have been found to have explicit ideologies for how to define shared experiences (Bar-Lev, 2008; Rier, 2007; Stommel & Koole, 2010; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009) and members who fail to accept these may receive unsolicited harsh advice. In accordance to the theoretical framework (Chapter Two), McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose that conformity is a mutual process that validates members' closeness at the same time as the

community's 'world-view' (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The question of whether being directive is in tension with being non-judgmental will be examined in more detail in Chapter Eight. Despite the insistence on action, one contradictory possible impact emerged: getting stuck in violence.

### Getting stuck in discussions about violence?

The potential of the forum to enable action was weighed against the possibility that talking about experiences of abuse could 'keep women in violence', and in this way have a negative impact on the 'moving on' process. The manager questioned whether the forum could cause dependence in the sense that participants might get stuck in sharing and reading stories rather than taking active steps towards ending violence.

(K) There are a few members that have been there from the very start. What role do you think they play for the forum, and for new members?

Well, again, I think it plays into the discussion of whether we can utilise them in the future (as peer-supporters)... And, one can ask oneself what they are getting out of it now. And we would not want to create a dependency, and actually, you know, the ideal would be to see women on the message-board to move on, because that is positive for them, but for some women it is meeting a particular need, in terms of their ongoing social interaction whether that is ongoing support. Because it is a message-board we are not in a position to influence that at all, and we would not want to encourage dependency but, there is not much we can do about it in effect (*The Manager*).

Concerns here are framed within the optimal goal of formal support, to guide women through the process of ending violence and then ideally see them 'move on'. Whilst realising the forum's social pull, people staying attached to the forum seemingly on "the other side" broke this pattern leading to the prospect of dependency.

When asking participants if the forum had helped them to move on from violence, 18 (of 45) had been helped to some extent (Q43). However, 14 had seen little or no positive effect on their ability to move on. The opposite question, asking if the forum had slowed down the process of moving on nine women (of 45) commented that constantly writing and talking about violence made them more focused on violence, although for some it was what they wanted and needed at the time (Q44). On one hand, members seemed to recognise that talking about violence had enabled them to come to terms with it, whilst, on the other, they seemed to think that to let go of violence they must eventually let go of the forum. Others found that engaging in other people's lives reinforced the worry about their own lives, or obstructed the process of dealing with their own emotions.

It is a crutch for me at the moment and I am increasingly aware one day the crutch must go. I'm scared of that day (*Participant 51, age-band 18-29*).

I had to have a break from it for a few weeks because constantly reading about others and in some cases others much worse off was making me feel down. It also meant that I was taking on the worries of others and thinking of little else. I needed to start focusing on my life a bit more. I think that reading about others sometimes meant I was escaping my own healing by worrying about others. Needed to take a step back (*Participant 48, age-band 40-49*).

Perhaps in that I sometimes feel that maybe I get a little 'addicted' to it and should be doing something more obviously, practically productive instead. But it provides something unique that it's hard to find elsewhere, and it's very comforting to know that I can go for a month or months without going on it and still come back (*Participant 4, age-band 50-59*).

The last quote illustrates that the forum might be used for comfort rather than as a springboard to more measurable acts ('practically productive'). The greater part of this sample was in the process of ending violence. Therefore, most women may not have been in a position where 'moving on' would have been possible. After all, the three years of the forum's existence was the longest anyone could have remained active. This discussion must be explored within the meaning of 'moving on' as a linear narrative – break-up, dealing with the aftermath, moving on – when this may not correspond to women's lives. For example, some women became members' years after violence ended to process memories or new feelings connected to it. New life events such as having children, or getting married may bring back memories, or questions of violence (Kelly et al, 1993). A recent study (Kelly et al, 2014) revealed support needs two and a half years after the use of support services had come to an end, showing that 'rebuilding lives' takes time and women may need to reconnect with support services along with the many ups and downs. Moreover, friendships in the forum, as well as new identities/status as helpers may also be reasons for why members return or remain active for longer periods. Social investments, social status and new identities are often difficult to transfer to the offline environment. On the other hand, focusing too much on violence could have a similar impact on members as the manager reported that it had on moderators in the sense of leading to a form of emotional exhaustion.

Thus, the forum is a space in which to take action, both for meaning-making and for help-seeking. However, the forum is also framed as a space to "be in", a refuge, that in a few cases may postpone more measurable acts. This also raises the question of what counts as impact; whether this is exclusively a measurable social change or if it also can mean an internal cognitive/emotional change. Adopting the latter standpoint, the following chapters will explore and argue for the significance of a space from/in which to contemplate and share knowledge.

Nevertheless, little is still known about the long-term use of the forum, the average time people remain active, and whether the forum is stifling rather than helping members to cope with the aftermath of violence. For a few of the respondents above, it seems to be doing both. To explore

this issue it would be necessary to profile these members and explore to what extent this is linked to time of engagement, amount of activity and how this may interact with everyday problems. It must also be contextualised with the need for long-term forms of support beyond the point where violence ends to pick up on isolation, anxiety, lingering questions, and depression that may last, or emerge at a later point (Kelly et al, 2014).

## Conclusions

The task set out in the beginning of this chapter was to present the views of forum hosts and members on what support in the forum means. It has become clear that these accounts escape dichotomies and pre-categorisations such as formal/informal support, support-group/community etc. Multiple framings of the meanings and impacts of the forum unveiled many layers of support: a complement/extension to other support; a source of information; a preparation and pathway to connect to formal support; a place “to be”; social network; and community.

Replicating findings from previous studies, the support provided by the online forum included emotional support (Zrebiec & Jacobson, 2001), directions for actions (Mo & Coulson, 2010), and information (Westbrook, 2007). A core theme is how these forms of support intersect with experiential knowledge. The forum was a platform in which, more than anything else, members shared experiences, a process that had had an impact on both understanding and help-seeking strategies. This is not surprising considering research and theory which propose that shared experiences enable 'empathic understanding' of problems, the core components on which advice and reflections can be received as well-intended (Thoits, 1986). Here, experiential knowledge had created a non-judgemental environment. Equally relevant is the medium - anonymous and available – as a long-term source of support where members could easily leave and return, which further reinforced emotional safety (Suler, 2004). The result of support in the forum must also be understood through participants' framing of the forum as a social network. In accordance with other online support forum studies, the forum can therefore be approached as an online community (Stommel, 2009), a significant resource for women in abusive relationships who often lack density in their social network and trust in the social system (Larance & Porter, 2004).

Another implication of the findings is that the forum is a virtual arena in which members' own participation and engagement is the foundation of the support, guided through common understandings of shared experiences, which in turn have real impact on their process of ending violence. Therefore, viewing the forum as simply a space for supportive transactions and advice is inaccurate. In this way, to an extent, support in the forum is a platform in which women help themselves *with* others. This requires a safe space in which to write, self-confidence and time. In other words, the forum was a real asset, especially for those who were already (to an extent)

resourceful, and could/were willing to take risks in the online environment. In addition, individual differences such as writing skills, social skills or coping style may influence whether members felt they belonged and the perceived level of support. Moreover, supporting previous research (Bar-Lev, 2008), the findings revealed norms and rules of how to end violence that could make some members feel under pressure to end the relationship.

Waldron (2000) contends that too much reliance on other members and a collective negative attitude towards formal help systems may create barriers to seeking medical and professional advice. The data from this study suggest that support in an online forum can coexist with formal off-line support, and that the two can inform and benefit from each other. Whilst engagement with the forum had raised a critical awareness of formal support systems and existing legal methods for some, this was balanced with discovery and encouragement to access such means for others. The latter consideration indicates that the forum was a space to familiarise oneself with, and overcome reluctance to use formal support. The bridge between the two is the moderators. In order to construct a safe space for mutual support between ‘survivors’ in the online setting, a considerable amount of professional work had to be carried out every day to: preserve a supportive structure; guide members towards formal alternatives; and take on the ethical responsibility for women’s safety within the limits of the internet. In this way, moderators built rather than disrupted the pathways between formal and informal support. This is more in line with recent studies suggesting that people seek online support because they are hesitant to use formal support in the first place because of costs, fear of coercion by formal agencies (Townsend et al, 2012), lack of trust in formal/clinical help, and having to deal with questions before and after meeting with professionals (Bell et al, 2011; Townsend et al, 2012).

In conclusion, providing a semi-independent safe space for contemplation, meaning-making, and decision-making may be as important for helping women to take action as the provision of formal support, tangible help and legal advice. The data suggest that such a space is most successful as an exclusive forum for people with similar experiences who can reinforce and influence the process of ending violence through experiential knowledge. Overall, the findings raise questions about the processes between exchange of experience, the normative dimensions and actions proposed. The connections between the forum as a social space, common experience, violence discourse, and action are all explored further in the chapters which follow.

## Chapter Six: Making experience count

Members of the forum are dealing with recognition, naming, and validation of abuse across all stages of ending violence: whilst violence is ongoing; when thinking about how to stop it; during court-procedures; and after violence has ended. The focus of this chapter is to explore one of the findings from Chapter Five in more detail: how reading and writing in the forum changed members' perspectives of violence. Here, the emphasis is on how this happens, how women apply meanings of acts and utterances within a violence discourse that focuses on control and power rather than discrete physical acts; confirm the existence and validity of their experiences; and simultaneously alter their understanding of violence. The significance of this form of 'recognition work' (Gee, 2005) is understood through the necessity of interrupting a process in which violence is internalised and normalised in the relationship (Lundgren, 2004; Chapter Three).

The definition and understanding of domestic violence has undergone many changes during the last three decades in the UK as in other countries in the West (Haaken, 2010; Chapter Three). When abused women make sense of experiences they are drawing on both new and old meanings of violence within socially derived discourses (Wilcox, 2008). Friends and families' understandings of violence have fundamental impact on whether an abused woman perceives her situation as serious (Liang et al, 2005). Thus, not only the abusive partner may actively deny his use of violence (Hearn, 1998), he may also find support in this denial within social networks, and communities more broadly (Klein, 2012; Chapter Three). For example, Wilcox (2008) points to the role of media representation of domestic violence in the UK for women's help-seeking. A narrow definition of abuse means that many women do not recognise their experiences as violence (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Walby & Allen, 2004; Wilcox, 2008). The self-help literature is an area of non-academic writing on domestic violence that has increasingly come to focus on emotional abuse and control. A search on 'emotional abuse' in an internet bookshop results in a list of guides on "how to": understand emotional abuse and control (Evans 2010); 'break free' from/stop abuse (Warner, 2012); and 'heal' from the 'scars' (Jantz & McMurray, 2009).

Previous studies have found that knowledge and beliefs about domestic violence guide abused women's actions and decisions. Typically, thus, when ending violence, women may go through a shift in how they think about violence and abuse (Enander & Holmberg, 2008), and part of this shift involves reinterpreting behaviour informed by violence discourses (Chapter Three). However, once violence has become 'normalised' in the relationship – a process in which previous sanctions and offences are made normal in the relationship (Lundgren, 2004; Chapter Three) - it may be more difficult for women to unpick this process on their own. That is, to build

a critical perspective on acts and utterances as being abusive, and to be confident in these new understandings.

This chapter analyses how women make sense of their experiences within two understandings of violence: 'violence as hitting'; and violence as 'a complex pattern', linked to the 'power and control wheel' (Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is concluded that the forum as a community empowers one discourse by treating it as the right one (Chapter Two), and thereby facilitates 'a shift' in how violence is understood (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The chapter is divided in three sections: the first outlining violence discourse relevant for members' understandings; the second discussing the process in which experience is understood through discourses; and the third showing the use of discourses in conversations.

## **Theoretical debates on the meaning of domestic violence**

Academic discourse continues to debate the existence, the extent of, and the nature of domestic violence (Harne & Radford, 2008). 'Domestic violence' as a social problem - rather than individual and pathological - was brought to the surface as part of the women's movement in the 70s in both the US and the UK (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Haaken, 2010), to raise what had previously been perceived as a private matter in public 'political' discussion and examination. Along with the development of provision (shelters, advocacy and support), a feminist perspective on domestic violence emerged through the stories that were told by women (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Hester et al, 1996). Thus, the concept of domestic violence has developed within a power struggle of who had the right to define it (Kelly & Radford, 1990; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Weedon, 1997).

What counts as violence has been driven by different parties' gendered assumptions about what is acceptable behaviour in a relationship and what is not (Connell, 2009). For example, physical 'disciplinary' actions in the form of slapping or hitting were legal practices for men to use on their wives in the UK in the seventeenth century, and sexual consent was taken for granted as being part of the marriage contract (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Such 'rights' were increasingly questioned, and more behaviour, acts and utterances within the marriage were conceptualised in theory and law as violence and abuse (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). From the 1970s the feminist domestic violence literature moved to include a multitude of non-physical abusive elements within a now widely accepted perspective in which violence is perceived as an ongoing form of controlling behaviour aimed to gain/reinforce power (Haaken, 2010; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Chapter Three).

How domestic violence is conceptualised has consequences for how violence is responded to. Viewing violence as separate outbursts of rage often leads to anger-management and counselling approaches (Haaken 2010; Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999). In contrast, the 'Power

and Control wheel' (Figure 7.1) is a model of violence based on the idea that men use violence and abuse strategically. This model was developed as a tool to use in a 'domestic abuse intervention program' (the "Duluth Model") in 1984 in the US (Pence & Paymar, 1993). With abused women's experiences as a 'reference point' - stories of their partners 'tactics' and behaviours - this model aimed to guide women and practitioners how to approach and understand men who abuse from a social perspective (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Figure 7.1: The power and the control wheel<sup>8</sup> (from Pence and Paymar 1993)



The wheel, with the cog comprising 'power' and 'control' symbolises how, from this perspective, these are the driving forces behind the use of the different forms of abuse. 'The Duluth model' has been adopted in many countries including the UK (Harne & Radford, 2008), and the wheel is also presented on the website to the forum host.

However, the complexity of a feminist inclusive definition of violence means the distinction between non-abuse and abuse may be unclear which risks weakening the concept (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999; Chapter Three) and thereby also the understanding of it (Walby & Allen, 2004). New perspectives on violence include difficult to define elements

8. Downloaded from: <http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html>

of control, and fuzzy boundaries between legal and illegal actions (Lundgren, 2004; Stark, 2007; Wilcox, 2006). Moreover, Lundgren (2004) argues that abuse within heterosexual relationship develops out of normalised double standards and power differences in many non-abusive relationships (Chapter Three). Such accepted double standards and gendered practices within non-abusive relationships create a form of entrance - a vulnerability - for punishment and sanctions in an abusive relationship to become normalised and acceptable, even when this has reached extreme levels (Lundgren, 2004; Chapter Three). Thus, when beginning to define less obvious elements of behaviour as violence, women must decide what counts as abuse and what may be a normal couple conflict, and this is what has become a collaborative pursuit in the forum.

The two models of violence – violence as based on power and control, and violence as separate incidents of physical force - could thus be considered as two poles on a linear continuum, a form of development and refinement of the conceptualisation and understanding of violence. However, in this chapter they will be examined as different models because in the threads they appear as competing discourses.

### ‘Hitting’ versus a ‘complex pattern’

Descriptions of violent acts, or of the abusive partner’s characteristics, appear throughout the data, and in particular in 78 threads (Chapter Four). Much of what follows is based on 20 of these 78 threads, which were started by members to deal specifically with naming behaviours and utterances as violence and abuse, and the challenges that arose when applying categories of violence. This does not mean that writing from the remaining 58 threads was not included in the analysis. Rather, all 78 threads confirm what the dominant discourse is.

Overall, a range of acts were described and identified as 'domestic violence' including, aggressive behaviour, beating, strangling, pushing, throwing things, pressure to have sex, name-calling, belittling, dishonouring, lying, denial of actions, mind-games, and manipulation and threats to use violence or commit suicide. Concepts such as physical violence, emotional/psychological violence, sexual abuse, financial abuse, control and harassment are mentioned. Writing on violence is organised around two discourses that tend to compete within individual accounts of violence and between members: violence as a complex pattern of abuse; and violence as hitting.

#### *The ‘complex pattern’ discourse*

The dominant framework of meaning that members employed to confirm the existence of violence is here referred to as ‘a complex pattern’ of abuse, a relationship dynamic that manifests in multiple forms. The common features of this discourse on violence that regularly appear include: that domestic violence is a particular combination of acts and talk rather than

separate incidents; that domestic abuse consists of many forms of abuse that are subtle, and on the surface invisible, manifestations and consequences of violence; that physical violence is only one dimension of domestic violence, and to define violence as merely hitting is an uninformed perspective based on a myth; that emotional abuse is just as harmful as physical abuse; and (in a part of the threads) that violence is a way to gain control and power. In addition, women use metaphors, for example, 'trap' to refer to experiences of controlling mechanisms. Not all women refer to power and control; rather it is the multiplicity of abuse that is most often stressed. This discourse provides a common framework to shape the understanding of, and bring meaning to, the concept of domestic violence. I do not suggest that all members drew on each of the features outlined below, but that the dominant elements outlined above intersect in various ways.

### *The 'Hitting' discourse*

In the second recurrent framework the physical act of 'hitting' is the only signifier. A 'real victim' is someone who is often beaten. There is no explicit competition between members about the two discursive meanings of violence in the sense that members are debating the truth in either meaning. As mentioned above, from the perspective of domestic violence as 'a complex pattern', the narrower model of violence is perceived as a 'myth', and is often made explicit as a disputed model of domestic violence that others believe in. Yet, the constant presence of the meaning of violence as 'hitting' in new members' accounts has partly shaped the second, normative discursive model. In order to avoid repetition, evidence and delivery of the two meanings will be discussed at the same time.

## **From recognition to naming and knowing**

To have experiences defined as violence, members must first map out particular elements - behaviours, feelings, attitudes, events, comments - they deem as being 'beyond the normal' (Kelly, 1988), or somehow problematic, and then describe these experiences in such a way that they are recognised as linked to conceptualisations of domestic violence. Kelly (1988:140) describes this process in 'three stages':

...defining the incident first as lying beyond the normal, acceptable or inevitable behaviour and, second, as abusive. Contacting support services or answering research questions involves a third step: naming the abuse as a particular form of abuse. To report an incident to the police, the event must be defined by women as a crime.

What one recognises as 'beyond the normal' in a context of violence, depends on what meaning is brought to what is 'normative', and how well experience fits in with either category. In order for an experience to count, the recognition of violence/abuse must also be validated by others within the community, and acts and utterances must be labelled according to recognised

concepts. In this way members are following a process from recognition of experiences as belonging to a model of violence, to naming them as such, and, eventually validating and treating this model as the right one, which could be understood as a state of knowing (Chapter Two). Thus, the interpretive process in which women understand their experiences starts with the meaning brought to the concept of violence. The perspective taken here is that the meanings of words and concepts are not static but depend on the person, the particular situation and the discourse in which the words/concepts/meanings are located (Chapter Two). Conversely, the meanings, which members apply, to an act or something that is said, depend on the immediate context, knowledge of the situation, dominant discourses, and experience. ‘Situated meaning’ is the result of such interpretive work, which constitutes the temporary meaning applied to concepts and experience “there and then” (Gee, 2005).

### ‘Recognition work’

The acts of using and altering discourses have been termed ‘recognition work’ (Gee, 2005). Gee uses this concept to explain how a particular meaning of a discourse is recognised, produced and reproduced.

...if you put language, action, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognise you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (behaviour) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer) (Gee 2005:27).

Through ‘recognition work’, broader meanings of violence are recognised, given meaning, reproduced and altered. At the same time, alternative discursive constructions that could have been drawn upon are excluded. In order to make violence recognisable as the “real thing”, it must resemble others’ constructions of the same concept. Alterations of discursive meanings happen when a discourse is different from what people would expect, but is still recognised (Gee, 2005). This has relevance for how members make use of the forum to access discourses, validate the existence of violence, as well as interrupt the ‘normalisation’ of violence (Lundgren, 2004).

Members highlight resemblances between experiences, and identify recurrent patterns of behaviour and responses to violence. ‘Recognition-work’ is pursued both by help-seekers to create a case of violence, and by responders who help to find the resemblance between her and other members’ experiences and concepts. Mapping boundaries between normal and ‘beyond the normal’ is ‘recognition-work’ that brings clarity into what counts as violence. Outlining what violence *is not* brings clarity to what it may be. Furthermore, in this chapter ‘emotions’ is another dimension of violence that can be recognised. For example, fear, guilt and shame become signifiers for typical sets of emotions of ‘the abused’. In extract 6.1 below, a member

does 'recognition-work' to help another member find the resemblance between her experiences and that of others.

*Extract 6.1: Eve<sup>9</sup>*

absolutely yes....(.)..and to add to the previous posts...living with all that pent-up aggression is akin to sitting on a powder keg that could go off at any second.....we have all experienced similar...temper tantrums, verbal abuse, name calling, destruction of personal items, pain or injury to our animals, children, physical violence to our person...escalating to total control manipulation and violence.....until we doubt our own minds...our sanity....i think you have a good grasp of the picture before you!! (Thread 115)

The member above describes a mental state of terror (sitting on a powder keg), actions of 'the abuser' (name calling, destruction of personal items), and predictions of further violence. As she points out herself, she is drawing a 'picture' of abuse that validates the help-seeker's experiences as being part of a collective experience. She also offers a number of conceptualisations of violence, 'verbal abuse', 'control', 'manipulation', 'physical violence'.

Whereas 'physical violence' as a concept is relatively easy to relate to the act of hitting, abuse as 'a complex pattern' is reliant on a combination of acts, and sometimes the intentions behind the acts that make up the meaning of new categories. Psychological/emotional abuse and control remain for some women confusing categories, which easily dissolve in attempts to identify specific acts as abusive or not abusive. In particular, the situated meanings of actions and utterances in a context of domestic violence may be different than in a non-abusive context, which makes it difficult to explain to other people exactly why a situation is perceived as threatening. For example, an utterance such as 'I will never leave you' may be read as romantic commitment in one context, but in the context of domestic violence, as a threat. This is why validation of interpretations of situated meanings is essential for gaining confidence in a particular interpretation. Below is an example of recognition work presented in a list of 'red-flags' identifying an abusive person: lies, dishonesty, 'put-downs', controlling behaviour. To assemble this list of behaviour, which constitutes elements of control, Miley (Extract 6.2) had to do recognition work to construct a version of 'abuser' behaviour.

*Extract 6.2: Miley*

Here are a few red flags that on reflection I noticed with my abuser in the early days:

- 1) Making excuses that don't quite 'add up'....(.)
- 2) Secretive - see above. Is evasive and cagey, won't be straight open and honest with you.
- 3) Subtle 'put downs' or ridicule. (.)...Eg, I have singing lessons, and shortly after we met I played him some of my recordings and he was quite disparaging about them.

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9. Note that extracts from threads have not been edited, except to shorten or remove material which might identify the writer.

- 4) Subtle ridicule or 'put downs' in front of others. (..) Eg, one night we went out with some friends of his. He asked me to drive as I had a bigger car, but he then criticised my driving in front of his friends.
- 5) Making plans for holidays etc, when he has only known you a short while; eg, I met mine in the autumn, and within a week of us meeting he suggested going away for New Year together (wrapping you up into a package that he can control)
- 6) Suggested that my hair would look nicer if I grew it long - it was short at the time - early control (Thread, 122)

Notable here, is the focus on the 'subtle' and manipulative behaviours of 'the abuser' that she identifies through her personal experiences. She links behaviour and comments to the core concept of control and in this way offer a specific meaning to the experience. Importantly, the examples she gives could, if they were read in a different context, be interpreted as signs of insensitivity (criticised my driving in front of his friends), or enthusiasm and dedication (going away for New Year together). However, the situated meanings of these actions are written within the idea of violence as a complex pattern: as early signs of control.

### Validation: expertise and theory

It has long been maintained in social sciences that establishing names for behaviour has real consequences for how something is treated and thought about (Hacking, 2000), let alone people's actions and decisions in relation to it (Foucault, 1980; Loseke, 2003; Chapter Two). Naming an act or comment 'abuse' means that it is deemed unacceptable, a potentially criminal act. This may have significant consequences for the person who committed the actions, as well as for the person who was the target of such behaviour. However, the effects of naming behaviour depend on who is doing it, and in what context. How experts define knowledge has generally higher status (Loseke, 2003:128), and knowledge that is accepted by an institution and or a wider community holds more power because it is linked to institutionally and culturally shared practices (Foucault, 1980).

Members interpret and validate violence through common sources of theory and concepts of violence. The forum's theory base is located within support service perspectives and literature (both popular and academic) on domestic violence. The importance of these books for the shaping of the forum discourse on violence and abuse cannot be underestimated. Although members referred to a number of books, one recurs. '*Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*' by Lundy Bancroft (2003) was referred to 37 times across the sample of 215 threads. Bancroft provides vivid representations of abuse by describing attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and different social contexts in which 'abusive men' act. The book is divided in sections on how 'abusive men' behave in many different situations. Bancroft not only narrates 'abuser' behaviour, but also the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours of victims of abuse. In

this way, Bancroft, who is here positioned as an expert, creates scenes of violence and of the abusive relationship dynamics.

The forum-moderator, also takes on the role as the expert in the forum (Chapter Five). She has the power to directly define cases of violence by confirming replies and by stepping in when other members seem unsure.

*Extract 6.3: The moderator*

Hi (.) and welcome to the Forum. I hope you are going to find the Forum a really useful space to learn about dv and also that it will help you to make decisions about your own situation. I can see you have been given very clear and supportive information about how dv is defined so I don't need to confirm to you that what you have described is abusive.

Even as she writes that she does not need to 'confirm' the abuse, this is in effect what she does. As was shown in Chapter Five, the moderators are often accorded status of being the ones who really know and hence can give an expert verdict; they play an active role in constructing and validating a model of violence. The moderator and the literature shaped and protected the boundaries of the meaning of violence constructed by the members.

## **Defining violence through discourses**

In the rest of this chapter, data from five threads on how situated meanings of acts are linked and confirmed to domestic violence concepts - violence as more than hitting, sexual coercion, and 'control' – are explored in more detail.

### **'He has never hit me...but'**

Understanding violence as 'hitting' is especially common amongst new members. One recurrent theme was posts from members who described scenarios in which no physical assault was involved, but nevertheless they felt harmed by "other things". To put those 'other things' into words is the challenge here, and from there to start finding resemblance between such experiences and concepts such as control, emotional/psychological abuse. Although none of these accounts included 'hitting', physical violence is still present in these scenarios through references to pushing, strangulation, throwing things around, and slapping. This shows that even the act of physical violence is not always clear-cut and easy to distinguish from acceptable but unwanted behaviour. This is not to say that all women who drew on the idea of violence as hitting *defined* domestic violence as hitting. Rather, members refer to the lack of hitting when constructing the evidence base for the abuse that did happen - as if it had to be declared. For example, Lucy below sought to have her situation validated as being serious enough to receive help. Having the abuse confirmed would mean that she could approach support services to help her exit the relationship.

*Extract 6.4.1: Lucy*

‘Is it bad enough for help?’ I think i am going insane’ i don’t know where to turn i am in a privately rented house with my so called partner joint tenancy although i don’t work so its his income we fight all the time he has never hit me but threatens to daily he has threatened to throw me down the stairs and on the odd occasion he has gripped me up, i am scared of him but i do try to stand up for myself, all he ever says is what have u done today the house is a tip, he expects dinner on the table when he comes home (.) i am expected to be a mind reader, i tried to talk to him about post natal depression and he said it does not exists and to grow up and deal with it, he pushes for sex daily and if i say no we fight and argue then he does not talk to me for days until i give in, he takes his emotions out on me and the children, i know this is not domestic abuse but it is hell he wont let me leave he says if i do he will take my children from me - kill me or convince ss that i am insane and my children are unsafe in my care i love my kids and would never harm them they are my world and all that stops me ending it all. i have no friends or family i have not had an adult conversation since my daughter was born and that was with the midwives, i am so lonely (Thread 49).

Lucy’s explicit definition of domestic violence is narrowly defined in terms of hitting – which he has never done – thus only physical violence “counts”. However, Lucy also assembles several aspects of violence - physical abuse ('he has gripped me'), threats, control, and sexual abuse – the combination of which she defines as being ‘hell’. This account of her partner’s behaviour fits the model that deems violence to be a plurality of acts including emotional abuse, sexual abuse, threats and unreasonable expectations, although she gives most weight to the lack of hitting. This highlights the importance of recognising one’s own experience as the same as an officially accepted meaning of domestic violence, and sometimes the need for it to be validated by others. Although being in a situation that an expert would easily recognise as being filled with coercive control, and the isolation that follows, it appears that Lucy still is in the process of reassessing her relationship within a new discourse that allows a plurality of abuse, and here seeks to confirm this with others. Receiving confirmation of violence and support at this moment could help to counter the partner’s perspective and interrupt isolation, which are central in Lucy’s account.

*Extract 6.4.2: Kim*

This is abuse. If someone does not respect you, your feelings or your right to be happy and unafraid and treat you with dignity then this is abuse. Would you treat someone that you cared for like this, I doubt it. Would it be worth speaking to the dv help line on this site. Abuse is not always violent. It can be emotional, psychological, financial, it takes many, many forms. It is to do with mutual respect (Thread 49).

Kim explicitly labels Lucy’s situation as abuse, rather than working with resemblances between experiences. This may be because Lucy provides so complete an account that within the forum discourse is an obvious case. Crucial for the definition of domestic violence in this post is the

partner's general attitude, i.e. devaluation and lack of respect for Lucy as a person with rights. Lack of respect is an element of abuse women often return to, revealing an understanding of violence grounded in ethics and moral standards. Explicitly stating that 'abuse is not always violence' she moves the interaction away from the idea of domestic violence as being 'hitting'. Many threads followed a similar pattern of meaning making, particularly when started by a new member: a forum member first implies that domestic violence is hitting, a responder challenges this with the forum discourse constructing violence as many forms of abuse, rooted in control and disrespect. A second example is Zoe who is in the middle of a break-up.

*Extract 6.5.1: Zoe*

Is this abuse hi ladies I'm not really sure about my situation just wanted to talk to someone. My partner has become increasingly controlling, he is always calling me selfish which I can be but i don't think I'm a selfish person. he has threatened to hit, burn knock out my teeth etc but has never actually hit me. he recently took the car away from me because its his car, so i went out and bought an old banger, obviously he went mad as we cant afford it, but he also told me 'sort myself out' which i did by buying a car i need to get to work too. he then goes on and on telling me to leave, and he threatens to get me sent to prison, that I will be sleeping in the car, tries to blackmail me?? this doesn't happen all the time just when we row, but I'm normally easy-going so don't really notice him being bossy. often when I bring up a problem he just says you know what you can do if you don't like it. I don't think this is normal behaviour but on the other hand he is a great dad to my son from a previous relationship and our daughter but sometimes I see him with our girl kissing her and stroking her hair etc for what I think is a bit to long I'm probably just being paranoid he also smokes a lot of cannabis. give me some idea ladies (Thread 17).

This extract repeats many of the features identified in Extract 5.4. The member is doing 'recognition work' when she, in her relationship story, draws out the elements she deems important in terms of whether her experiences can be included in the concept of abuse. The two meanings of violence emerge through her story: violence as a complex pattern, and violence as 'hitting'. A number of behaviours – 'threats', 'controlling' behaviour, 'blackmail' – are recognised as 'beyond the normal', but are weighed against the fact that he has never 'hit' her. Thus, listing the pros and cons with him as a partner and a father, Zoe has already circled what she suspects to be abuse but seeks help to affirm her interpretation. Apart from the lack of hitting, a few mitigating factors are also deemed significant. First, the bad behaviour mainly happens during arguments indicating that this made the partner's behaviour more justifiable or different from typical domestic violence. Second, Zoe ascribes significance to her partner's qualities as a father, ('a great dad') although she suspects that he might be potentially abusive to the daughter as well. Taken together, it is the combination of acts that makes up the pattern of abuse. Zoe has recognised a broad spectrum of behaviour, including characteristics of him and

her (her 'easy-going', 'selfish', him 'bossy'), that are all deemed potentially important for whether her situation can be defined as abusive or not. Robin responds.

*Extract 6.5.2: Robin*

As [already] said, so sorry if this is not what you want to hear, but it has all the text book red flags of an abuser...Many people think DV and abuse only happen when you get your head smashed in, or that it isn't much to worry about if he does not hit you...But the control, the mind games, the manipulation, are all part of abuse, emotional and psychological...And the scars this types of abuse leave are just as bad as the physical abuse, if not worse. Many people have said in here that bruises fade, but emotional scars stay....All of them operate the same way, and start out pretty much how you describe, remember they are always testing and pushing boundaries.... I think you are kind of on the "middle stages" of an abusive relationship....And yes when they are nice they are the most caring and loving and funny men in the world and they make us feel so loved and so safe with them...But this "happy nice" stages end and in comes the bad guy again....About what you feel in regards to his relationship with your daughter...I can only say that you are a mother, you have that instinct trust it, when something seems weird or maybe a bit too much....it is because inside you something is telling you this is not appropriate...i (.) when something is really pure and transparent and comes from good intention we usually don't doubt if things are the way they are supposed to be. When we wonder and doubt it is usually a sign that something IS off. Hope I was not to harsh....And that you found some answers (Thread 17).

Robin introduces a discourse of 'abuse' and 'abuser behaviour' as being a complex pattern. Once again, the meaning of violence here is many forms of abuse including 'control' and 'manipulation'. Moreover, Robin also strengthens the status of non-physical abuse as a serious form of abuse, just as harmful as physical violence. She explains how 'people' frame emotional abuse as a form of abuse that does not really count, a notion that many forum members take a stance against. No member in the threads analysed in this study said that the physical abuse they had experienced was more severe than emotional abuse. Thus, downplaying emotional abuse is here presented as the invisible 'other voice' that does not know better, that is nevertheless presented in new members' accounts. Consequently, some members noted that physical violence had the "advantage" of clarity: the most accepted and visible evidence of violence.

The rest of Robin's post focuses on the character in the centre of the dominant discursive model of abuse: the abuser. Robin holds Zoe's account as a 'text-book' example of warning signs of the 'abuser', based on an archetype not specified here. Even if the notion of 'text-book' is a way of saying that Zoe's partner was a typical 'abuser' from the forum's view, it could also be one of the actual textbooks on 'abusers' circulating in the forum. Robin weaves together different elements that she views as 'warning-signs': switching between the good and 'the bad guy'; 'pushing boundaries'; controlling behaviour.

Many theorists have observed that violence often escalates (Lundgren, 2004). In the forum,

partly in conflict with the notion that all forms of abuse are equally serious, is the common idea that abuse begins with small incidents, and then escalates with physical violence introduced later in the process. Robin places Zoe in the middle of such an escalation. That physical violence is the end-point of such escalation indicates that the physical violence is, within this rationale, somehow perceived as ‘worse’. This seems to go against the notion that all violence is equally harmful. However, the attempts to highlight the serious effects of emotional abuse on health and wellbeing serve to include more experiences in the meaning of violence, and affirm that all abuse is damaging for the person experiencing it. The escalation model, on the other hand, narrates that the risks of staying in an abusive relationship increase over time (this will be explored in more detail in Chapter Eight), and serves to render Zoe’s experiences as the “real thing”, although the relationship has not reached the nastiest parts yet. Taken together, the two conflicting notions of what is most serious can coexist within the accepted model on violence because they have different functions in discourse: one is recognition, the other a plea to act (Chapter Eight).

Having validated Zoe’s experiences as abusive, Robin moves on to encourage her to trust her doubts regarding the safety of the daughter, although no convincing evidence of abuse is presented. Stressing the validity of one’s own questioning is typical for how women approach the existence of abuse in the forum. A third response uses one’s own experience to assess abuse.

*Extract 6.5.3: Grace*

abuse...comes in all shapes and sizes but from my own personal experience i would say yes, it is. a lot of it sounds personally familiar, the car arguments, the threats to have to sleep in the car (in my case the dog pens to start with), the making you leave yes yes yes been there done that. awful to say, but be careful, quite often the threats escalate - if its in his mind enough to threaten then its in there enough to do it if he can find what he considers enough justification. sorry i know that isn't what you want to hear (Thread 17)

In contrast to Robin, Grace shows more hesitation to label Zoe’s situation. Zoe’s account is assessed and compared through resemblance with her personal experiences of ‘the car arguments’, ‘the threats to have to sleep in the car’. The difference between validating abuse through naming it, as Robin did, and through comparing it to personal experiences, reveals the two forms of knowledge drawn on in the forum. Grace does not immediately find resemblance between Zoe’s experiences and a more abstract model of violence. However, the similarities between their experiences make the abuse valid, stressing the importance of experiential knowledge, and how resemblance between members’ experiences is a way to be more certain if something counts as violence. The moderator explicitly labels Zoe’s experiences domestic violence later in this thread.

### *Defining emotional abuse*

So far, this chapter has shown how members construct the meaning of violence by comparing experiences between the meaning of violence as 'hitting', and a more inclusive definition. New members ask for help to validate their concerns and explore to what degree domestic violence can be extended to other behaviours. In the last extract below there is actually no evidence for the notion of domestic violence as 'hitting', but it nevertheless deals with the difficulty of giving specific meaning to a concept such as 'emotional abuse'. Eliza (Extract 6.6.1) recognises her partner's behaviour and utterances but doubts to what extent this would count as emotional abuse.

#### *Extract 6.6.1: Eliza*

Emotional abuse? 'Hi, I'm new to this forum so please bear with me. I was hoping for some advice or opinions on what constitutes emotional abuse. For some time I feel like I'm being bullied or controlled by my husband, but I'm always made to feel like it's my fault, and for an easy life I apologise till I'm blue in the face. In order to help you decide if I am suffering emotional abuse I'll explain a recent scenario and I'd really appreciate your opinions and advice. Less than a month ago I had my first child, I've had a number of complications (.). My husband works, he has quite an intensive job so I don't ask him to help at all with night feeds etc and he goes to bed early to get extra sleep but not only that but he asked me to take the baby and stay with other relatives at least 2 times a week to allow him a night of undisturbed sleep. Yesterday evening we followed the same pattern as usual he went to bed early and I stayed up until baby asleep. Since the birth we've left a night light on because it's quite difficult to make it into our bedroom due to stairs, wires etc. when I went to take her in, it was pitch black I struggled carrying her, and other stuff and negotiating stairs etc in the dark, baring in mind I'm only out of hospital a week, I'm still finding it difficult to lift and carry the baby. I was probably a bit noisy as I was worried about tripping. I get in and put the night light on, he doesn't move. I then get myself rest for bed and get in. There wasn't enough covers to cover me so I pulled them a bit to get enough to cover me. I was creeping around trying to avoid waking both him and baby. He suddenly turned to me and at the top of his voice shouted "f\*\*k you" and it startled me so much that I burst into tears. He then shouts at me to "stop playing mind games" I try and explain that i just wanted some covers and he said that I should "just make do with what I have to avoid waking him up" he then went in to say that I had "deliberately made as much noise entering the room as possible" if he heard me struggling in the dark with the baby, why didn't he help? He then said I needed to grow up, and I'm a psycho. At that point I was very upset and decided to call my mum to see if I could go to hers for the night. He told me that I take more looking after than a baby, that he feels like he has two children and that I should go on my own and leave the baby with him. Baring in mind I'm doing nothing but trying to make his life easier - having been out of hospital a week, I'm doing all the cleaning, as he won't. I'm shopping to buy dinner and him dinner on the days I stay with relatives, and I stay with relatives to give him unbroken sleep. As soon as baby cries I take her out of our room and I ask him to do nothing with regards to her care in order to make life easier for him. He told me last night that once he has gone to bed, "nothing but a screaming baby is allowed to wake

him" This is one example of many but am I right in thinking he's a bully or am i just suffering with lack of sleep and taking it the wrong way? (Thread 106).

As already hinted in the title of the post the main question Eliza has is how this experience fits with the concept of emotional abuse. Eliza narrates the short period of time after the birth of her baby in which she recognises all the elements that, for her, represent the meaning of the concept: her partner's verbal abuse, 'being a bully', 'shouting', and 'name-calling'; the partner's lack of collaboration and adjustment to their new life with the baby. The partner had left the nursing work to Eliza who did this whilst at the same time trying to make life easier for her partner. She wonders whether her partner is a 'bully', or if she is 'oversensitive', if this is a normal conflict. In other words, she questions whether what in some contexts are gendered expectations of mothers to do all the work with the babies, as well as prioritise the partner's happiness and wellbeing over herself, might actually be abuse.

*Extract 6.6.2: Alison*

walking on egg shells? Nothing is ever right - no matter how hard you try.? Feel confused, drained, bullied, undermined. Sweetheart, you are not a psycho. You are normal and just trying to do your best. Can't say the same for your husband. Do you think it's normal to have to go and stay at relatives homes so he can have some sleep?? It's not. Take care hun and consider your safety. They start with shouting, bullying and move on. Be mindful and though you think he probably never would please be aware that this behaviour escalates. Arm yourself with knowledge of abusers and their behaviour because I'm afraid to say - you are with one (Thread 106).

*Extract 6.6.3: Emma*

it's a classic case! The bedcovers thing is so totally illustrative of it all. The power balance is so completely skewed towards him that you are literally living (sleeping) on the tiniest edges of his life and huge sense of entitlement. The bed and bedcovers thing is such a perfect example, isn't it - everything that's his is his, everything that's yours is his, too, unless he allows you a fragment of it. And only then if he doesn't want it at the time. And tiptoeing around in the dark risking tripping on the stairs while holding a tiny precious new baby, all so he isn't inconvenienced? No, no, no. (.) Shouting precedes violence and you have another vulnerable life to consider now. He doesn't sound safe. And it's assault even if he doesn't touch you but just scares you or makes you fear he might be about to hit you (Thread 106).

*Extract 6.6.4: Bo*

Your just home after having the baby and with complication this is a time he should be supporting you instead he is choosing to belittle and demean you. Your are not wrong he is a bully (...) Mine was the same after the babies were born...I had to keep them quiet and go downstairs and never disturb him when getting into bed and god forbid should the baby cry! Although he could make as much noise as he wanted and wake me for anything he wanted at anytime day or night! Keep reading on here and keep posting because you will get stronger, it's all likely to be a bit shocking at first

when you start realising the extent of his behaviour as you may come across things you didnt even consider were abusive (Thread 106).

The three responses mirror many of the discursive constructs of violence and processes of recognition work discussed above: the escalation model ('They start with shouting, bullying and move on'), to bring out elements that can capture a shared definition of abuse in actions, feelings; comparisons between normal and not normal; labelling 'the abuser' rather than the abuse.

However, there are three other features, which are not discussed elsewhere. First, emotional abuse is not easily measured as the actions are not always visible and the effects internal. Instead of focusing on the behaviour of the partner, as a form of recognition work, Alison offers an interpretation of Eliza's experiences as being typical for recipients of abuse: 'Walking on egg shells? Nothing is ever right - no matter how hard you try? Feel confused, drained, bullied, and undermined'. Identifying emotional abuse through the feelings and effects of violence captures another dimension of the forum discourse of violence: recognition of specific emotions. To have their feelings recognised and validated as part of a pattern of abuse is another important factor of knowing that an interpretation is shared, and subsequently confirmed as emotional abuse, again showing the use of experiential knowledge. Emotional abuse damages the self, leaving evidence in form of self-doubt (Chapter Three). Shared emotions are thus another pathway to recognising experiences within a model of a complex pattern of violence.

Moreover, notable in these responses are the situated meanings of gendered responsibilities. That the woman should carry the main burden of nurturing a new-born child and taking care of the home is considered by many as traditional outdated values. Both Emma and Bo stress the double standards within the relationship as central for the meaning of domestic violence, which is a form of injustice and inequality in the relationship. In other words, what some would recognise as a gruesome conflict between husband and wife was identified as part of an abusive dynamic. Although some feminist domestic violence theorists include exploitation of labour as part of a pattern of violence (Wilcox, 2006), not all definitions would. Analysing violence as a power dynamic enables members to detect more general injustice in relationships linked to gendered expectations, through which the partners felt entitled to use violence. These gendered expectations are also what created the discursive conflict in Eliza's account in the first place.

Alison and Bo's posts encourage Eliza to gain knowledge about abuse through reading the literature and other posts to gain power ('keep reading /Arm yourself with knowledge of abusers'), and to discover new meanings of abuse. In other words, they argue that Eliza can find both knowledge and conviction through immersion in the forum perspective of violence. Finally, the extracts above are examples of the analytic pursuit conducted by the members themselves, based on a form of expertise that may have developed through reflexive work on

the forum. This specific expertise, could be argued, is a situated knowledge on violence, emerged from theory linked to the Power and Control Wheel, and women's personal interpretations of experiences through this model.

To summarise, members undertake work zooming in and out from small details, feelings, acts and utterances, to more general pictures of violence in order to recognise, name and affirm what counts as violence. The main challenge for women at the outset is to learn this new perspective on violence, and distinguish it from arguments and unhappiness in the relationship.

### Sexual abuse as part of 'the big trap'

One of the findings from Chapter Five was that the forum was a space where women could talk about sexual abuse. Twelve threads of the original 78 contained writing that in some way mentioned sexual abuse, and three women questioned whether what they depicted as 'pushing for sex' was part of a broader pattern of behaviour. These posts were initiated by members who were looking back at a history of abuse that had now ended, indicating that, as is pointed out by Amy below, sexual abuse is particularly difficult to talk about. Here, other discourses emerge on rape, sexuality and gendered responsibilities in the relationship which compete with the recognition of their experiences as abuse. There is no urgency in her post that nevertheless evokes sixteen lengthy responses by nine different members, which makes it the longest thread in the sample.

#### *Extract 6.7.1: Amy*

I wonder sometimes about which bits of my relationship were abuse and which were normal. or whether it was all abuse and one big trap.(.) If i think about the sexual side of our relationship. When we first got together it was nice i guess. I felt like he was very attracted to me all the time and always wanted to be with me. But when I look back to the years and months before i left - i didn't want to have sex with him at all and found it very difficult. However - i still did because if i didn't, he would say i didn't love him, that he would explode, that he "needed to" have sex otherwise he would be frustrated and get annoyed, that I was being unfair. (.) I would try to move so he couldn't but he would be quite strong or say that i was frigid and no fun anymore. Most of the time, sex with him was painful - because I didn't want to do it and also because he didn't make any attempt to kiss or cuddle me before hand (.) My questions are - is the above me being frigid? or me being boring? or me being just tired of the relationship? or is his behaviour not acceptable and part of the abuse? (...) i feel i have started to come to terms with the fact that i have been abused mentally, emotionally and physically (on a few occasions. But with the sexual side of the relationship - it has been different. I've not spoken about it. Not allowed myself to think about it - never got upset or mentioned it to him as part of the abuse - so its almost like its been forgotten or didn't happen. (.) I guess sometimes everyone gets tired and doesn't feel like it - i never wanted it for the last 3 or 4 years really but i felt it was really my duty to have sex with him. Was it? I don't know (Thread 201).

Amy approached sexual abuse as a different experience from other parts of the violence, and as being a particularly difficult topic. Yet, she integrates it with the concept of domestic violence when she discusses sexual abuse as being part of the ‘big trap’. Amy lists many instances that in domestic violence theory would be viewed as sexual coercion or rape: sex when she was asleep; emotional pressure; ultimatums; pressure to send him texts. In her account, she also agrees to sex to spare him the suffering of feeling unloved or being sexual frustrated. In a previous study, sexual abuse survivors understood agreeing to sex to spare their partners’ feelings as a form of ‘emotion work’: Frith and Kitzinger (1998) explain this as an attempt to construct agency, as being stronger than their men, rather than positioning the self as victim of sexual coercion. In contrast, Amy wonders whether her ‘emotion-work’ (‘if i didn't, he would say i didn't love him’) was potentially part of the abuse.

The meaning of Amy’s experiences as violence and abuse is discussed along with several gendered stereotypes and expectations: that women who do not want sex are considered frigid or boring; that women are obliged to satisfy their men sexually; and, related to the latter, that men’s sexual abuse can be justified as biological need. Amy asks whether her lack of interest in sex came down to her own character, i.e. 'boring', 'frigid', her being 'tired of the relationship', or if it was 'part of the abuse'. This suggests that, in this account, the meaning of sexual abuse is weighted against what may be perceived as his rights and expectations.

*Extract 6.7.2: Saga*

It was all part of the abuse.(.) if he knew you had said no and went ahead anyway, or you were in no state to say no (i.e. when asleep) then it's rape. He sounds incredibly sexually abusive. In a loving relationship sex is a loving, wonderful, fun thing to do, not a chore, not something you HAVE to do but something you want to do. Of course you'd get put off sex if every time you have sex it's painful [here Saga narrate her ex-partner's sexual demands and behaviour] ...Of course I stopped wanting sex, it was horrific. What you've been through will be incredibly hard to deal with, it's not something that's easy to accept, the horrible thing that I had to learn was that chances are if you have to ask if it was abuse, then it was abuse (Thread 201)

*Extract 6.7.3: Eva*

(...) I have had normal loving sex before and believe me (.) you will experience and realise these horrible men don't know the meaning of the word. Don't doubt yourself, like me we are starting to open up our eyes to see that the abuse was there in every area but we couldn't see it. I hope you and I both stay strong and get over this (Thread 201).

The first response from Saga reads like a definition of rape. Although some of Amy’s experiences were included in this definition, i.e. having sex with her ‘when asleep’, it did not include having “agreed to sex”, even when she did not want to. This is an aspect that is more complicated to include in the definition of abuse. Instead, both responders do recognition work when they distinguish between normal sex and not normal sex based on their experiences.

Finding resemblance between Amy, Saga and Eva's experiences, the commonalities were deemed the opposite of what sex should be - loving and fun. Here, mapping how things should be was more inclusive and clear than using a legal definition of rape. Not wanting sex in circumstances of sexual 'horrors' is from Saga's view a natural reaction to trauma that is not easy to overcome and not linked to being 'frigid' and or 'boring'. All responders in this thread affirm the sexual abuse in Amy's relationship and integrate sexual pressure (not having sex will result in negative consequences) and rape as part of domestic violence as a pattern of many forms of abuse. The similarities of women's experiences later in this thread continued to strengthen this view.

At the end of her post, similar to Robin in extract 6.5.2, Saga encourages Amy to trust her own instincts about what is right and wrong, 'if you have to ask if it was abuse...' often this turns out to be true. This particular pathway to knowledge can be a way to manage the difficulty of recognising experiences within violence categories, and bring importance to unnamed feelings of injustice. In other words, members' insistence on validating their own questioning can be a reflection of the lack of public discourses that addresses pressured sex in a relationship. One woman explicitly linked gendered expectations of sex with the recent legalisation on rape within marriage, and that many 'abusers' still believe that it is their right to have sex whenever they like.

The forum model of violence, that domestic violence is a complex pattern, tends to stretch into gendered expectations in the relationship, which in feminist domestic violence theory is argued to both overlap with (Lundgren, 2004) or constitute abuse (Wilcox, 2006; Chapter Three). In the last extract, reflecting research on sexual coercion within relationships (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998; Kelly & Radford, 1990), members analysed and understood the concept of sexual abuse as being more complex than the meaning of 'rape' as non-consensual sex. Rather, here it is men's (and women's) expectations that men should be in control of when and how to have sex in the relationship that explains men's sense of entitlement to coerce women to have sex, and why women may agree to it even when they do not want to.

### Focusing on the intentions behind acts

In threads where members share the same perspective on abuse as being a complex pattern, more and more elements are identified as being part of it. Here, too, members use recognition work to find the resemblance between experiences and violence discourse often linked to current conceptualisations of violence as being control and power. Influences from the domestic violence literature and the popular literature are evident, for example, when they discuss the impact of alternating loving and violent behaviour, threats, bullying, lies, manipulation and control. Typically, someone asks questions about their (ex) partner's behaviour, or simply lets

off steam about something the (ex) partner did. This creates a chain of responses where other women remember and recognise similar stories from their experience. All women seem to be talking from a similar knowledge base, an adoption and interpretation of a specific violence discourse.

In contrast to previous extracts, in extract 6.8 below women are theorising through the dominant model of violence revealing that a shift in understanding away from the idea that violence is 'hitting' has already taken place. More than confirming the existence of abuse, what is increasingly important here is to confirm the intention of the abuser to control.

*Extract 6.8.1: Bay*

He turned the boiler off AGAIN this morning so there was no heating and no hot water for my shower. (He isn't having a shower this morning). (.) What hurts is that he's been doing it for so long. And all that time - just doing it occasionally - enough times to drive me crazy - but not so much that I realised that he was doing it just to upset me. I'd get up and sort the kids out - get them dressed and breakfast - and tidy up a bit - and then I'd think to have a shower and get dressed and - hey presto no hot water. (.) And I'd ask him and he would say - oh I think the sound of the boiler wakes the kids up (their room is above). And I'd say - well I don't think it does??? And even if that's it, then they need to get used to it - it's a 'house' noise?? (.) So then I changed the timing on the boiler. I said look I'll put it on for an hour at 4am when the kids are in a deeper sleep. And then he did it again and again. And I'd say - look you don't need to turn it off, ive changed the settings!! And every weekend when he did it we were automatically off to a bad start. And of course he NEVER turned off the boiler on a day when he wanted a shower. It was infuriating. I just kept thinking - if I could just get him to understand that this is p\*ssing me off he'll stop doing it!! But I could never get him to understand. (.) ALL THAT TIME!!!! Trying to bite my tongue, make compromises, and all that time he was F\*\*\*ING ME UP. I am so cross and so sad. And so it continues except now he does it more frequently. And now we all know it's intentional. Just need to get through the next few months. Need to be free of him (Thread 80).

*Extract 6.8.2: Miley*

Arghh, my ex-husband used to do this with the boiler too! And he made very similar excuses to yours (.) When we were getting divorced I was working away from Monday to Friday, and would drive home for 3 hrs on a Friday night fancying a soak in the bath, and hey presto, the hot water tank would be stone cold! (...)Their behaviour is illogical and irrational, but the reason they do it is because seeing us infuriated and frustrated gives them a sense of power over us, and they get a kick out of it. I've come to the conclusion that they just love treating us like a puppets on a string, and they do it just because they can. (.) Sadly your husband is upping the anti because you have had the audacity (in his mind) to start divorce proceedings, so the abuse is increasing. I suspect you'll be relieved to be free of him in the end (Thread 80).

*Extract 6.8.3: Bay*

Counting the days. I cannot wait to be rid of him. (.)Thanks Miley for replying - I read your posts and think our stories are similar in lots of ways. Or our experiences. The type of controlling behaviour. His other favourite is to turn off my alarm clock radio at the wall if I am ever away overnight - or if the alarm or snooze goes off if I am out of the room. I tried each time to patiently explain that when he did that the clock, date, alarms, radio stations all needed resetting. It would only happen from time to time - except he's done it twice now in the last month. Now I just reset it and don't say anything. He even used to claim that he didn't know how to set timers and clocks in the house so (.) I used to diligently go round the house doing them all, like I had my 'special' job. I feel like a total IDIOT (Thread 80).

*Extract 6.8.4: Miley*

I think our experiences sound very similar. I read (.) that you had this feeling that you needed space and that's exactly how I used to feel with my ex-husband too. He was very demanding (Lundy's The Demand Man - as well as the Water Torturer, Mr Right and the Drill Sergeant!!!) AAAAARGHHHH Looking back it's a miracle I didn't go insane considering he did his best to drive me insane. I tell you, I was soooooo utterly relieved when he left. I have never been so glad to see the back of someone in my whole life!! (Thread 80)

The meaning of 'gaslighting', which the whole thread is focused on, is not specified until further down. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that 'gaslighting' is, for the members involved, a familiar concept. Gaslighting is a term used in some academic publications, and more commonly in the popular literature. It is linked to a film 'Gaslight' (1944) about a husband who plays tricks on his wife to make her believe that she is going insane. Bay defines 'gaslighting' through her story of how her partner had turned off the boiler so that she could not have a shower in the morning, and that he did this often enough to drive her 'crazy' but not often enough to make her identify his bad intentions. Bay recalls a similar episode.

Thus, Miley and Bay reinterpret the actions of their partners, and confirm each other's new interpretations. Most significant, they identify the partner's action as *deliberate* attempts to humiliate them and create inconveniences or extra work. It was the intention to make them unbalanced and angry that made the partners' actions part of the abuse, not the act in itself. Miley explains how she used to compromise, manage feelings of anger and disappointments, have patience, and reach understanding through communication. The partner was assumed to be merely inconsiderate and a bad listener. Now realising that her partner had mocked her attempts to be agreeable, her previous interpretation of an irritating but nonviolent conflict in the marriage was no longer valid. Instead, in accordance with the forum model of violence, Bay and Miley view the partner's 'gaslighting' as a strategy to obtain 'a sense of power'. In the second part of the thread, several more members join the discussion and give examples of 'gaslighting'. They are all remembering situations when they had tried to help the partner, or had tried to

make compromises, and were now humiliated or infuriated when they realised that this had been part of a trick. These different experiences, none of which involved illegal acts, were compared and interpreted as conscious strategies to exercise power.

The examples above have in common that women reposition themselves from stupefied to victimised by the partner's malignancy. In other words, women are narrating a development where they reposition themselves from being unaware of their partners' cruel ways, to having the upper hand now when their partner's malicious ways are exposed. The members' new perspective of their situation as unjust makes anger appropriate. Indeed, anger is the dominant emotion in this thread ('ALL THAT TIME!!!!') challenging potential previous emotions of shame. Using emotional language of anger can be read as a way to support and confirm each other's' interpretations of the partners' bad intentions, and wrongdoings (Oliker, 1989:128). In addition, now a decision to end the relationship is viewed as obvious and inevitable. Miley and Bay both state that it is, or will be a relief to be 'rid of him'.

In this thread women develop a group position through their common opposition to 'abusers' as a group. Rather than using 'I' and 'him' members write 'we' and 'they'. The perpetrator is depicted as clever and sinister. Moreover, the group position enables 'rage' not only towards a single individual but to 'abusers' as a category, as demonstrated in a comment further down the thread 'I'm not a man hater... but this thread has really made me LOATHE these abusive b\*\*\*\*\*ds (Thread 80)'. "Empathic anger" on behalf of other members strengthens group solidarity, community identity, and challenges shame (Summers-Effler, 2002). This thread is an example of the frequent everyday politics going on in the forum, often involving members that know each other well. The meaning of many of the men's actions described above could in another context be understood differently. However, within the shared perspective on violence, these actions are part of violence and abuse.

In this final example, members have completely abandoned the idea of hitting as a signifier of abuse, or any other specific behavioural category. Here the situated meanings and intentions behind actions are what define abuse. When women shift their perspective towards seeing a multitude of interlinked intentional acts, they identify abusive tactics in many areas of the relationship. This process is extended in the next chapter where the intentions partly determine if someone can be held responsible for violence.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the forum as a space for making sense of, and allow sense-making, is understood as facilitating confidence in the dominant discourse of violence at a time when members' understandings of violence are changing. In the extracts, members define abuse by giving meaning to otherwise abstract and ambiguous concepts of violence, and at the same time

exclude competing interpretations and discourses. Within this process, experiences of abuse are recognised and understood between and within two understandings of violence. When violence discourse wins over competing interpretations it challenges normalisations of abuse in the relationship, and thereby brings confidence to women's feelings of hurt and injustice. The implications for a virtual reflexive space involves facilitating a shift in the process of 'understanding' (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Enander 2011), and this affirms entitlement to seek further support.

What, then, is significant about defining violence in a forum? This chapter has shown that, although many women are aware of these new conceptualisations of violence, these are competing with other meanings and it remains a challenge to be *confident* about this for the self. Other meanings included acceptable arguments (extract 6.5; 6.6), valid expectations in the relationships (extract 6.6; 6.7), misunderstandings (extract 6.7). In addition, women needed to confirm the intention behind behaviour less clearly related to violence as being malicious ways to gain power and control in the relationship (extract 7.8), in order to confirm 'the complex pattern' of behaviour that is, within new conceptualisations of violence. Women were, thus, in the process of critically examining their experiences within a new framing of violence, but at the same time expressed hesitation as to where the line between abuse and non-abuse was drawn and how to appropriate new concepts.

This shows the ambiguity of concepts, which may be empty categories unless they are filled with meaning and examples from experience. In contrast to domestic violence as 'hitting', the terms 'emotional/psychological' abuse does not provide much guidance of what it actually entails. As demonstrated in this Chapter, often it is the situation or combination with other acts which determines if something can be perceived as emotional/psychological abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). In addition, to explicitly defend emotional abuse as a serious form of harm may reflect fear of having experiences of non-physical abuse diminished. This reveals that these conceptualisations are not yet 'common sense' knowledge. In order for a discourse to bear power, it must be accepted by a community, as well as having some institutional power (Foucault, 1980; Chapter Two).

Thus, when women are recognising behaviour and utterances as belonging to either of the two abstract models of violence, they both interpret their experiences through these models, and at the same time bring meaning to them, hence appropriate them in accordance with their own experiences (Gee, 2005). Receiving validation and confirmation at this point in time may have turned emerging interpretations towards confidence in new concepts. Significance was brought to women's intuitions, and members' right to define their own experiences, revealing a discourse on knowledge often found in self-help groups (Borkman, 1976). This form of validation encouraged women to stop doubting or second-guessing themselves, and may

counterbalance the undermining many had experienced from their partners (Chapter Two). Treating the ‘complex pattern’ discourse as the “real” perspective of violence within the forum community further reinforces its validity and the effects of using it. Here the moderator plays an important role providing a link between members’ interpretations and the forum host, a formally organised practice, which is, according to Foucault (1980), the prominent form of discursive force. Importantly though, there is no clear distinction between formal experts and other members of the forum. It is quite likely that some members treat others as experts. In many respects, members are also experts after having developed ‘experiential expertise’ (Borkman, 1999) and knowledge about domestic violence theory. As illustrated by the extracts, members often offered skilful analyses to dismantle violence and abuse in members’ scenarios, a form of analysis that exceeded simple recognition and identification of violence. Meaning-making thus extends from recognition to theorising about violence.

Taken together, what makes the dominant discourse successful is that it is both initially constructed through women’s experiences (Dobash & Dobash, 1998), hence is a knowledge produced to accommodate this particular reality (Smith, 1992), and is employed and reinterpreted through forum-members’ stories. This indicates that although conversations are not formally led, members have employed, and often expand, the forum host’s perspective on violence. As Weedon (1997) pointed out, a counter-discourse may not be able to remove other ways of interpreting a situation, but it provides a space to resist more dominant discourses. Even if all forum interpretations of violence may not be accepted by everyone outside the forum, they have still been strengthened perhaps just enough in order for members to stick to them even when they are challenged outside the forum. Whilst there is no direct evidence for this here, it is possible that an over-inclusive definition of violence may defuse what violence is not, and once again create uncertainty of what it is.

The implication this reflexive work may have for women can be located within domestic violence theory. Whereas ‘normalisation’ of violence means that more and more abusive aspects become part of a ‘normal’ relationship (Lundgren, 2004; Chapter Three), this chapter has shown how women are engaged in the reverse practice, in which more and more elements of the relationship are recognised as being part of the abuse. This corresponds to the process in which violence is ending (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The forum has thus provided a platform to make sense of violence during such a shift, and with support from findings from Chapter Five, can be argued to have facilitated it.

Gaining confidence in new interpretations may be crucial before any actions are taken to seek help and to make a change (Chapter Three). The impact of the processes outlined here is supported by the findings in Chapter Five, showing that women had violence confirmed and understood, and learned new dimensions of violence. Members’ reflexive work not only shaped

the understanding of abuse amongst the members involved in each thread, but also the unknown number of members who read these postings months and years later.

## Chapter Seven: Locating Responsibility through new Stereotypes

One of the findings in Chapter Five was that the forum had helped to address self-blame, and that the forum was described as an emotional safe environment. This chapter explores the discursive processes behind these findings; how members are not only identifying abuse, but also determine who is responsible for it. The forum, then, becomes a platform to respond to self-blame, blame from the partner, 'the invisible other', and known friends and family. Collective discursive tools in the form of formula stories about 'the abuser' and 'the abused' are employed to locate blame with 'the abusers'. These processes are understood through the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two. Reinterpreting feelings of shame and guilt through a common discursive framework can be a way to reinterpret and create a distance to feelings of shame and guilt. It is concluded that whilst the forum provides a community response against blaming, there is a lack of a gendered framework to address women's resistance and use of violence. Before moving on to discuss the specific context of domestic violence, it is necessary to explore discourses on harm, responsibility and the concept of formula stories.

### *Feeling rules and pure victims*

Loseke (2003) explains how culturally derived ideas and feeling-rules determine when a person is deemed responsible for causing harm. Feeling-rules are discursively constructed within broader discourses, and can justify and account for actions (Chapter Two): for instance, if the harm was viewed as 'intentional', and if the harm was caused for 'no good reason' (Loseke 2003:85-86). For example, using violence in self-defence or to protect someone else can be morally acceptable. In addition, less responsibility is conferred if harm caused can be viewed as accidental, unintentional, and/or outside the person's control. This also applies in a legal context, where having less control within the act, mitigates or reduces responsibility for the use of violence (Corrado, 2012). Relevant for this context, discursive assumptions about strong emotions have been perceived as reducing a person's control and thus responsibility (Edwards, 1997). In turn, there are also feeling rules which only recognise blameless and "pure" victims, i.e. someone who did not in any way influence the harm that was caused. People often feel more sympathy for those who meet the cultural standards of being 'morally pure' (Loseke, 2003:78-83). Whether people find that a victim of violence fits such a description may also depend on whether the situation is perceived as serious; and whether they believe that the victim is actively trying to remove herself from the problem (Clark, 1987). In cases of domestic violence hidden processes of control may conceal both the magnitude of violence and women's efforts to end it (Chapter Three).

Taken together, feeling rules make it uncomfortable to rebuke someone if their actions can be understood or explained. At the same time, the victimised are expected to fit into particular victim-narratives in order to have their victimisation acknowledged.

*Justify/mitigate men, blame women*

In the context of domestic violence, blame is gendered both in frequency and practice (Berns, 2001). Whilst both men and women's violence can be rationalised as without intention and defensible justifications, blame commonly rests on gendered expectations of men and women as social categories. Women are expected to be less aggressive (Weare, 2013), more nurturing, altruistic, putting their partner's needs first, and even changing their partner's violent impulses through love (Baly, 2010; Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000). Women may also be positioned (or position themselves) as the relationship expert, the better communicator, therefore better able to build a healthy relationship through communication (Hochschild, 1979), as well as serving the male partner in different ways (Stark, 2007:2011-2012). Claims that violence was provoked may thereby receive some acceptance if women are perceived to have failed to live up to such gendered expectations. Moreover, that men are expected to be more aggressive, more prone to rage than women (Weiss, 2009) can mitigate responsibility through the assumption that men's violence is a more expected method for resolving conflicts or personal troubles. These discourses are used in cases of violence to explain how an act of violence can be understood, mitigated, and at the same time, make women less pure victims.

Feminist researchers have identified how media (Wilcox, 2006), perpetrators of violence (Hearn, 1998), volunteer workers (Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010), and women themselves draw on these discourses to justify/excuse men's violence, and simultaneously blame women. Overall, public discourse has focused mostly on victims and how they cope with violence (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). In contrast, few discourses address the responsibility of the abusive partner, how he comes to use violence, or efforts to end the violence he is causing (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). As a consequence perpetrators are largely invisible. Relying on these narratives leads to judging women's actions since there is little understanding of the perpetrator of abuse. This is also reflected in research amongst support workers (Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010). Although volunteer workers did not espouse victim-blaming, they nonetheless suggested it was women's responsibility to keep herself safe by avoiding evoking men's anger, or situations where they could be beaten. Implicitly they suggested women brought violence on themselves when they returned to, or married a man, who had a history of violence.

Jeff Hearn (1998) found that perpetrators of domestic violence mitigated and denied their violence using a number of recurrent themes: the victim had triggered their uncontrollable rage, and hence was the primary perpetrator; that their violence was an act of self-defence or a mutual process in which neither had control over the violence; or that they had defensible good reasons.

In turn, women's self-blame has also been characterised by notions of control. Eisikovits et al (1998) found that, although women perceived that they had more control than their partner, both they and their partners were described as potentially 'dangerous' (Eisikovits et al, 1998). They had to control their own self, in order to control the abusive partner's lack of control.

Taken together, the circumstances that can deflect blame from the doer of domestic violence, making it less intentional, and for a defensible reason, are often located with the victim, who at the same time is made less of a victim. Table 7.1, summarises some of the ways women have been made responsible for violence which simultaneously mitigated/justified men's use of violence.

Table 7.1: Mitigations/justifications found in both literature and threads<sup>10</sup>

<b>Justified/Mitigated Violence</b>	<b>How it becomes the victims responsibility</b>
He was provoked/lost control	She provoked it/triggered it
It was mutual	She was equally part of the problem
Perpetrator invisible	She wanted it (masochism)
Anyone would have done the same thing	It is something about her (she is bad)
He is a vulnerable character	She failed to help him (not good enough)
He is a violent difficult character	She failed to set limits/'leave'

All these discursive constructs suggest that she, in different ways, brought the harm on herself or at least failed to protect herself from it, and as such, according to cultural feeling-rules, she is no longer a blameless victim. In this process, the doer's agency is mitigated, and the receiver of violence, by implication appears to have more agency than the person committing violence.

Once again, the gendered expectations discussed above, shed light on some of the reasons women are accused of having both too much influence over her partner's actions (she provoked, she wanted it) and too little (she failed to set limits, failed to help him).

#### *Feminist counter-arguments*

To counter victim-blame feminist researchers and activists have worked with different concepts of motives for violence and collective identities for abused women. First, researchers emphasised the agency of the perpetrator, demonstrating that he is in control during violent actions, and secondly, argued that men use violence to both gain and preserve control (Chapter Three). In this logic both requirements for allocating blame to someone are fulfilled: the violence was *intentional*, and for *no good reason*.

10. This list is not exhaustive but focused on the themes present in threads.

The receiver of violence on the other hand has been constructed both as a 'victim' and a 'survivor' (Dunn 2004). This public story enables the creation of a 'pure victim' and a more valued 'collective identity' as a survivor. However, both 'victim' and 'survivor' are troubled identities in relation to agency (Leisenring, 2006; Kelly, Regan & Burton, 1993). The word victim, evokes sympathy, and firmly locates responsibility with the perpetrator of crime. On the other hand, being a perfect victim – trapped, scared – goes against a cultural ideal of individualism and personal responsibility (Dunn, 2005). The use of 'survivor' as collective identity is more associated with a fighter than a helpless person, and gives credit to women's efforts to resist/end violence (Dunn, 2004) and highlights the failure of the state to protect women against violence (Kelly, 1988). On the other hand, 'survivor' makes those who were less able to cope appear as weak (Kelly et al, 1993).

Formula stories (Loseke, 2000, 2011) around concepts of 'survivor' or/and 'victim' are simplified stories of ending violence. Yet, they can be tools to help abused women, their social network, and support workers to approach domestic violence in a particular way, less inclined to victim-blame (Loseke, 2000). At the same time they also limit the discussions to one story: that the woman is 'a pure victim and the abusive man a pure villain', and that 'abuse is extreme' (Loseke 2000:151). This formula story means women who actually experience violence quickly run out of 'script' when trying to use cultural and institutional narratives (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007).

What follows is an analysis of how members have collectively developed and made use of formula stories about 'the abuser' and 'the abused', and how responsibility for violence is located in this process.

## **Formula stories and discourses**

Social identities are central to defining and understanding social activities within specific social practices (Chapter Two). Throughout the analysis it became clear that women in the forum were well-versed in the ways abused women are perceived in various contexts (Hacking, 2000). To counter the blame discourses in table 7.1 the women employed and shared a common discursive framing of 'the abuser' and 'the abused'. The concept of formula story (Loseke, 2000, 2011), a familiar discursive narrative, is used as an analytic tool to reveal these identities, and is linked to discursive assumptions about violence.

Forty-eight threads, to different extent, focused on responsibility for violence. In each, a case of violence was presented for inspection in which the receiver of abuse and the perpetrator were evaluated. Other social networks, the legal system, partners, and other members' stories all featured in women's writing. Feelings, doubts, comments, actions, lack of actions, and theories

were raised and evaluated. Posts from different people are subsequently discussed, criticised, doubted and validated.

Three analytic steps were carried out simultaneously in working with these threads. The first step was to identify the common discursive perspectives on *the roots of violence*. Different explanations of violence change the politics: who is made responsible; who will be helped; and who will be blamed. These explanations identified a dominant perspective that gave shape to the formula story of ‘the abuser’. Cultural stories are heterogeneous and it is never possible to define them or their boundaries (Loseke, 2011). Thus, what constituted the meaning of ‘the abuser’ varied in threads depending on the author and the particular time it was written. Yet, there are common patterns – key assumptions – behind how the stories were narrated and used, and what was achieved with them. The second step involved finding different concerns about how violence could be mitigated/justified, pointing to other possible framings. These concerns were classified into five different types: mutual violence; provocation; consciousness of guilt; failure to help partner; and failure to end violence. In addition, the different voices in the threads prompting these concerns were identified: her feelings; partner’s speech; other people’s thinking/saying. The final analytic step was to investigate how responsibility was attributed to the partner through the formula stories. Whilst not seeking to create a singular picture, a few general features of ‘the abused’ and ‘the abuser’ are described before moving on to the analysis of threads.

#### *‘The abuser’*

The typical abuser is presented as using violence to have things; to control; to gain/preserve power; to punish; and “give lessons”. Sometimes it is ‘the abuser’s’ moral values and beliefs that hold justifications for the use of violence - he felt *entitled* to use it if she violates his system of rules, or challenges his power. The abuser’s violence appears here as calculated, intentional and purposeful: a violent character (in the sample always a man), clever and sinister who systematically breaks down his victim. Less visible in this sample, but found in discussions overall, is the abuser as a comical and predictable character. Vulnerability, emotions and loss of control play a less prominent role in this dominant version of ‘the abuser’. Thus, the narrative of ‘the abuser’ fulfils the criteria for violence that cannot be mitigated or justified – violence that is intentional and for no good reasons. These core assumptions can be linked to a feminist perspective on violence. However, existing explanations of why ‘the abuser’ abuses crossed over into two broader discourses: the first attributes the use of violence to pathology (cruelty and lack of empathy, egocentricity, personality disorders); the second holds that entitlement to abuse stems from culture (beliefs about marriage/relationships give men rights). The latter, social perspective reflects the hosts’ ideological standpoint. In academic research, the feminist and the pathological perspective on abuse are often presented as contradictory: the former

locating violence in normality and the second in pathology (Enander, 2010). What links the social and the psychological perspective in threads is that violence was explained as caused by the person's everyday way of being rather than loss of control – his morality, psychological make-up, and way of reasoning.

### *'The abused'*

The formula story about 'the abuser' implicitly and explicitly gave shape to who 'the abused' may be and her role in the abuse. Members in the forum use notions of both the victim and the survivor. Common characteristics suggest that she could have been *anyone*; or particularly good, and/or strong, amazing, and constantly battling to free herself from violence. Within the story of the victim, the abuser's blaming is a way of controlling her from within. As a result, she takes on responsibility for violence. Overall, 'the abused' meets requirements for being a morally pure victim who is harmed for no good reason.

Similar features were found as 'formula stories' in a support group for 'battered' women in the US (Loseke, 2000). Participants were encouraged to explain the development of the relationship as a sign that she had been, and still was controlled. Here, the discussion leader, a professional support worker, guided the conversations so that women were encouraged to apply these stories to their own lives. The main point with stories about 'the abuser' and 'the abused' was that they had clear moral boundaries confirming the feeling rules (Loseke, 2000).

The rest of this chapter will explore how these constructs of the abused and the abuser were used in threads, and how members encouraged each other to locate blame with 'the abuser'.

## **Feelings of guilt and shame as an abuser fabrication**

A core component in the formula stories about 'the abuser' is that he will try to justify/deny responsibility for violence, which in turn makes the fact that women who have been abused are blamed, and blame themselves, axiomatic within dominant narratives. In the first thread, Abbie is trying to find a way to make her partner leave.

### *Extract 7.1.1: Abbie*

He constantly told me i would never get rid of him, he was never leaving the house, he said i was the one who had to leave and not take our baby son with me. Of course i stayed. He has convinced me I'm stupid, worthless and unable to make decisions for myself. Even though the house is mine, the tenancy is in my name only and although he has tried to bully me into putting him on the tenancy i have been strong and not done it. Early this year he went to anger management and said he was going to control his anger. This has lead to anything that happens being my fault for starting it apparently. [*describing a situation in which her partner's friend has moved into the house and now both are refusing to move out*]...people have said to me to just chuck them both out, but that's not

easy with an abusive partner, I'm cross that he has bullied me into getting his own way yet again, i feel like I'm just here as cook, cleaner and house keeper (Thread 91).

This post does not directly present a scenario where she needs to define blame as she, in an ironic remark, acknowledges his blaming ('anything that happens being my fault for starting it apparently'). However, blaming, and bullying as an abuser strategy, and taking on blame as victim characteristics are significant parts of the story that explain and account for why her partner is still living in her house. Abbie is constructing a scenario in which her partner, being the typical abuser, convinces her over time that she is worthless and to blame for violence, and tries to 'bully' her into giving up her house. Abbie takes at least two positions in this story: she has both been moulded by his bullying ('He has convinced me I'm stupid, worthless') whilst at the same time she is 'strong' to have resisted much of his emotional manipulation. Bay responds.

*Extract 7.1.2: Bay*

None of this is your fault. And everyone on this forum understands. I promise you, there are lots of us here who recognise everything you have just said in some aspect or another. I haven't got long to post this morning, but I had to reply - I sound like a stuck record, but please read Why Does He Do That - by Lundy Bancroft, because it explains all the motivations. It was like reading my life back to me, but instead of thinking that I had somehow caused all of this I could suddenly understand how clearly he was causing it. In my heart I never felt it was ALL ME - but he kept saying I was causing it. That's such a common controlling method - they put the blame on to you, and you use all your energy up to try and pacify them and make things better - just as they want - all your attention on him and none on you. He doesn't want you to talk to anyone else because you might find out that he is a controlling bully, and that his behaviour is unacceptable. You might get support and strength to leave (Thread 91).

Although Abbie did not specifically address self-blame, this response treats her post as if it did, reflecting how counter-blaming is a central task amongst supporters. The dominant narratives of 'the abused' and 'the abuser' are taking shape in this response. First, Bay identifies herself as being part of a larger collective ('there are lots of us') of women who have taken on blame for the abuse: self-blame is normal amongst women who have been abused. She refers to the 'abuser's' violence as deliberate with specific intentions, a 'common controlling method', that is designed to entrap. Bay locates responsibility with him by narrating the abused and the abuser - he has control, she is controlled, and blaming is a way to maintain control. These constructs confirm abuse is intentional and for no good reason. Notable in Bay's story is, once again, how it is the abused who takes the blame, narrated in parallel with the real her who can resist it ('In my heart I never felt it was ALL ME'). Thus, whilst the collective stories confirm that the partner's violence is malicious, and that women are manipulated to believe otherwise, they are

told from the perspective of another reflexive self which maintains a different truth, hence giving agency to Bay and Abbie.

Many scenarios in which women explore whether they pushed their partner to use violence are entangled with questions of whether this counts as abuse, as discussed in Chapter Six. For example, Lola, a woman who was in the middle of a court procedure draws out the reality of abuse to explicate who is primarily responsible for violence.

*Extract 7.2.1: Lola*

sometimes when he pushed me it was because i didn't back down in the row as i was frustrated again, so (not because he's told me it) i do feel like sometimes I provoked him to the point he couldn't take me going on anymore. no it was DV but I just can't get my head around it, it doesn't feel real, i feel like I'm living a lie going through police and courts and divorce, is stupid as it sounds i still feel i could've changed him or saved him from doing what he did, that i pushed him too it, [incident of when she was thrown things at, strangled] Just don't understand how it went from being perfect in the first few months to this?? Maybe I'm in denial i don't know. see reading what he did sounds so bad but now looking back on it i keep thinking it wasn't that bad? am i mad? i mean it happened exactly as i wrote it so why cant i get it through to my thick head that it is bad, i mean i still don't feel or see him as an abuser, or when i talk about it i feel like I'm doubting myself and he wasn't that bad?? What is wrong with me. (...) i no everyone says its normal to feel like this because that's what they do to u but it feels so real! sorry girls xxx (Thread 12)

Lola has defined violence and taken legal actions. Yet, another thought has equal or stronger presence in her account: that she was partly or equally responsible, hence she may not be a real victim and he may not be a real perpetrator. Lola partly evaluates her partner's violence through a model that suggests that she provoked violence, meaning the abuse was in some way justified or mitigated. In addition, she writes that she feels responsible for not having been able to 'save him' or 'change him'. Interestingly, Lola is aware of and agrees with the dominant narratives of 'the abused' and 'the abuser', that doubt, self-blame and guilt are fabricated by the abuser, and not a result of a real moral shortcoming, but she is affected by victim-blaming nonetheless ('I no everyone says its normal to feel like this because that's what they do to u but it feels so real!'). In this context it makes perfect sense and is understood by Robin below: feelings of self-blame and guilt are treated as fabrications, constructed by 'the abuser', another member constructs a blame-free Lola.

*Extract 7.2.2: Response, Robin*

(...) honey believe me you are doing a great job! maybe it is the power that words have and once you start calling things by their real name there is no going back, he IS AN ABUSER and he will always be one! And yes we all doubt ourselves, we all think it wasn't that bad, we all make excuses for them and we all blame ourselves thinking we could have done much better and try harder, but the truth is it has nothing to do with us, it is about them, how their mind works and how they manipulate

us, and play mind games with us that keep us wondering if their trying to kill us was really our fault because poor little men they didn't really mean it but we kept pushing their buttons! (...) and that is why it takes us so long to get out, and why we feel guilty, and why we start thinking it wasn't so bad after all...(Thread 12)

Robin constructs a blame-free Lola through the narratives of 'the abused' and 'the abuser'. Lola is made part of the collective of women in the forum, and is freed from responsibility for the violence when positioned inside 'the abuser's' manipulation and control. The abuser on the other hand, strategically wins influence over the abused ('they manipulate us, and play mind games with us') until they are under 'the abuser's' 'control'. Lola could have been anyone ('it has nothing to do with us'), whereas the abuser became a fixed character ('he IS AN ABUSER and he will always be one!') unable to change or be saved. Once again, the story recurs of the 'abuser' who transfers blame and guilt to the abused, as a strategy to gain control in the relationship.

In this post, the discursive constructs in Table 7.1 are turned around - 'the abused' 'is highly receptive to influence from the abuser, but her influence (agency) is minimal. The idea that a strong emotional bond is developed by the captured, as a victim coping strategy, is based on the assumption that *influence* is one-way. Jameson (2010:349) argues that, although this theory aims to explain why a victim becomes protective towards a capturer, it assumes that the victim is a child-like or immature character linked to 'women' as a social category, in contrast to the 'rational British male'. This raises the question of whether this discursive move enables agency or whether it reproduces a lack of agency.

These examples show how the allocation of responsibility is an ongoing process, unfinished even after violence has been identified. It is clear, therefore, that blaming discourses are powerful and can interrupt confidence in whether violence actually existed in the first place (Chapter Six), and are linked to the gendered assumptions underpinning blame presented in Table 7.1. If men are to expect certain things in the relationship, then, abuse may be perceived as a justified response to failure to meet them. In contrast, by situating such feelings within the formula-story of the 'the abuser' and 'the abused' self-blame is a condition that most abused women experience. Both extracts show how members are encouraged by each other to talk about themselves as social categories, and examine their experiences through collective identities.

## **Gendered expectations and love discourses**

Members use collective ideas about 'the abused' and 'the abuser' to discuss guilt and responsibility towards the partner. For example, claiming vulnerability or illness, is considered

another abuser strategy to shift the responsibility for violence away from him. In one thread, Alex questions the abuser's consciousness of his actions as harmful.

*Extract 7.4.1: Alex*

This is one of the things that holds me back in saying much to other people, it's not the only reason but i do actually believe he doesn't know he is abusive if that makes sense. (...) why would he keep wanting me to go back if he knew it was wrong? Why would he keep doing it? Why would he play victim? oh i don't know... (...)i think if i knew he knew what he was doing was wrong i'd have felt more likely to have

- 1) left straight away (although i didn't realise it was abuse)
- 2) reported him for the violence rather than just the harassment (the police did nothing though)
- 3) i wouldn't feel sorry for him now (Thread 11)

Alex explains how compassion for her partner, who had positioned himself as the victim, led her to hide the truth about his behaviour from herself, him and others. This can be linked to the feeling rules outlined above: that in order to hold someone responsible for harm done, acts must be intentional and for no good reason (Loseke, 2003). If the partner never realises that he has been abusive, how can the abuse have been intentional? Holding the partner responsible for his actions is clearly obstructed here. Alex, on the other hand, positions herself as having more control than her partner, having protected him from other peoples' and his own judgements of himself. Alex's post provokes a discussion on 'the abuser's' consciousness of guilt.

*Extract 7.4.2: Carrie*

No they don't. My partner would never describe himself as abusive - he really seems to feel entitled to 'say and do what he wants'(...) As Bancroft says in his book 'Why does he do that', these individuals have twisted values. The last letter my partner wrote, he laid the blame firmly onto me, pointing out all my shortcomings and summed it up by saying 'it's no wonder I get a bit narky sometimes'. So that's it - a bit narky. (.) He feels entitled to bully, insult, put down and control. He feels that his partner should be making sacrifices to keep him happy. He doesn't think his partner has any right to happiness of her own. He's jealous, insecure, mistrusting. He enjoys inflicting pain, unhappiness and joylessness on everyone around him. He doesn't know he is in the wrong and so will never get help. I didn't know I was being abused or I would have left years ago - he made me think it was all ME. (.) I feel a bit sorry for him because despite everything he said, I know now that I'm a decent, good woman and that we could have had it all. (Thread 11)

In Carrie's account, neither of them had recognised the abuse. Her partner feels 'entitled' to use violence, i.e. can justify violence through what he thinks are her wrong-doings. However, explaining violence as linked to entitlement clashes with the feeling rules. From the abuser's perspective, the use of violence was normal and justified, so he may have perceived that he had good reasons, and may not be aware that it was wrong. In Carrie's account, however, her partner also uses violence as a form of pleasure (to 'inflict pain, unhappiness'), which fulfils the feeling

rule of causing harm for no good reason. In addition, he is also immature, 'jealous, insecure, and mistrusting'. She, on the other hand, in accordance to the formula story, is different from her partner – 'a decent good woman'. Ally, another member, responds with a slightly different version of 'the abuser'.

*Extract 7.4.3: Ally*

Someone who is abusive is normally abusive in secret. Why is this? Because they know what they are doing is wrong. Control and power are what they enjoy, they also never take responsibility for their actions. They constantly feel as though they have been wronged and so are justified in their perverse lessons to teach you how to toe the line. I spent years feeling sorry for my husband (...) In the end I have decided that I may never understand because at the end of the day i am a decent, caring normal person and the way to move on is to make the most of yourself; they will always be who they are and nothing will ever change that. (Thread 11)

In contrast to Carrie, Ally invokes a conscious 'abuser' who is aware of how his actions are viewed by the public, although he can justify the violence to himself. Even if entitlement is key in this account, it is a sense of entitlement that belongs to 'the abuser', hence cannot be understood by 'a decent, caring normal person'. An important point in this post is that 'the abuser' fulfils the requirements that can hold him responsible for his actions: 'they know what they are doing is wrong' and they do it for no good reason i.e. to gain 'power' and 'control'. In narrating the abuser as unchangeable it is no longer important to understand the partner's perspective, because a) nothing could ever have been different, and b) she cannot be held responsible for something he *is*, independently of her. Thus, Ally can stop feeling sorry for her partner, even if a sense of closure based on understanding can never be fully achieved. Another member, Joyce, separates the cruel part of her partner from the 'real him', suggesting a conscious 'abuser' who also can more fully comprehend his responsibility.

*Extract 7.4.4: Joyce*

My ex actually admitted to me in one of his very rare glimpses into the real him....he admitted that he felt awful the morning after (...).all this was when I first met him and I was only seeing the charmer personified...and at this time in our relationship, I was still subservient enough not to have had any of the behaviour handed out to me first hand....I felt I was beyond this treatment.....due to the fact that I was the "only" person who understood him...(deluded or what????)..and had given him more than enough of my love to never warrant it...(fairy tales did exist then!!!)...little did I realise this was all part of the grooming process....as he opened up to me the smallest sliver of his dark side, I opened up the whole of me to him and he knew every single button to press (.) By the time, I ever realised that I was just another pawn in his game of chess that he always played with people's lives, (.) I was lost....until....one day, I woke and realised that I had no more to give...he had sucked me dry, like a real vampire....so ....for your question.... my reply is YES. They won't ever admit it publicly, but inside ....deep down....I do believe that they know. The more they battle with their own conscience, the worse their behaviour becomes.... (.) And that's why we end up ...spending the rest

of our lives putting ourselves back together again....because we only entered into the relationships we had because we are not the type of people who use people but want to help others. (Thread 11)

Although the formula story of 'the abuser' can be found in Joyce's account, the 'real him' felt remorse for his actions, although the guilt for these actions triggered more violence. Her account of the initial hopes about the partner draws on a love discourse as explained in Towns and Adams (2000). The assumption that her loving him would exclude her as one of his victims can be linked to the idea that love can cure people of bad behaviour. However, it also belongs to a gendered blaming discourse that suggests that it is the woman's role to help men overcome their weaknesses (Table 7.1). According to her current thoughts, however, her good intentions had been exploited to the extent that she 'lost' herself, reaching 'rock-bottom' (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). At the same time, 'the abuser', was calculating in his victimisation of her and made her a 'pawn in his game of chess'. This version of 'the abuser' presents a subject who is both deliberate and intentional in his actions. Similar to Carry and Ally, Joyce simultaneously constructs a more valued version of the victim. Her good intentions to help her partner had given him the chance to abuse and exploit her, but this is also what made her a worthwhile human being. In the last extract Alex affirms Joyce's counter discourse.

*Extract 7.4.5: Alex*

something you said right at the end, about wanting to help people makes so much sense... i always feel the need to help others above myself and i don't like to disappoint people (.) and i think this is what he used to get me to do stuff for him. when (.) our child's needs came first and I'm guessing that's why the violence and sex attacks escalated because i was no longer little miss helpful and i gained a voice and friends after so many years of him pushing them away. the thing that hurts the most... all the times i helped him and when i needed him he saw them as opportunities to abuse me more. (.) (Thread 11)

Alex's response resonated with this more valued innocent self. Here, it was her previous helpfulness rather than her failures that created a space for the partner to use violence. Although not clearly explicated, this is an attempt to draw a link between gendered expectations and violence. Overall in this thread, members are detecting gendered practices as underpinning the partners' sense of entitlement for using violence. However, the idea of entitlement also gives a rationale for the use of violence - he did what he thought was right - hence violence could then, to an extent, be understood even if not approved of. Even more salient here, it becomes more difficult to hold someone responsible for an offence he did not know he committed. Thus, the idea of entitlement, gendered expectations, and love-discourses clashes with the feeling-rules and raises complicated questions about the mechanisms of violence and abuse, whether the partner was conscious of guilt. This prompted women to also include stereotypes of victim and abuser, as fixed separate characters which could defuse feelings of pity or guilt.

Enander (2010, 2011), and Enander and Holmberg (2008), explore the role of compassion and pity as common emotions, untangled and resisted in the process of ending violence, and both are evident in this thread. The unchangeable abuser may have served to disrupt these emotions to make it easier to move on. Or, as put by Enander (2011), orient women towards 'Mr Hyde'. In turn, the expectations of women to be caring and loving were turned into a positive collective victim identity, which allowed more self-worth and less blame. This confirms the importance and the purpose of these discussions in marking out the perpetrator's guilt even if the notion of an unchangeable abuser hinders the understanding of who 'the abuser' is and precludes the possibility of change. In this way, whilst blame in itself was challenged, the idea of the morally pure and feminine victim was strengthened, and the man's actions linked to the formulaic 'abuser'.

## **Challenging the voice of the 'other'**

In several threads members identified and critically examined the notion of 'victim-blaming'. In this section blame is no longer the voice of the perpetrator but the voice of other unknown and known people. In these threads, 'they' refers to people other than the partners and 'we' is the collective of those who have experienced violence. Once again, members make use of the dominant narratives of 'the abused' and 'the abuser' to challenge other people's blaming. Discourses of equality relying heavily on the victim's ability to leave (Enander, 2011:21), and that women who have been abused are weak and do not know how to stand up for themselves are discussed.

### *Extract 7.5.1: Erin<sup>11</sup>*

why is it that abused women are seen to be stupid????  
Like we enjoy being hit or are just plain thick?  
Like we bring it on ourselves  
And our abusers are kinda elevated of the guilt because we go back  
I've lost count of the times people have said to me well you will keep taking him back  
As if it's a choice????  
I'm so mad about [it] this evening  
People really need to understand that domestic violence IS a crime where the victim has no control over what is happening to her! Just like for example an old man who was victim of a street robbery, he had no control over his mugger  
So why oh why do people continue to have this total disrespect for the victim in dv cases and perpetuate the cycle of abuse  
God it makes me so mad (...)

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11. Although each sentence is written on a new line, the whole extract is written by the same person.

Another thing that winds me up is when people say, well you will let him walk all over you!

Really???????

NO I had NO choice and he did everything to make me realise that I one hundred percent had NO choice

No choice in him hitting me, no choice in him raping me

NO CHOICE

Maybe when everyone realises dv is a crime, with a perpetrator and a victim people will wise up and stop the enabling victim blaming bull s\*\*t!

Sorry ladies rant over (Thread 206)

In the post above, the stigmatising view of the victim held by others is verbalised line by line: ‘stupid’, ‘they want it’, ‘they chose it’, and ‘they deserve it’. To counter these notions, which imply that the victim has brought the violence on herself, Erin constructs another version of the victim emphasising women’s lack of control over the violence. Here the abused is a pure victim with no control over the perpetrator, to the same extent as the ‘old man who was a victim of a street robbery’. In light of how public discourse mitigates domestic violence within gendered expectations in the relationship and ideas about the victim (Table 7.1), this can be viewed as an attempt to detach domestic violence from these expectations. At the same time, once again the formula story of ‘the abuser’ can explain how the victim of abuse is controlled externally as well as internally to the extent that even going back is outside her control. This illustrates the problems with ‘the victim’ as a collective identity - although it resists the notion that women bring violence on themselves, their agency becomes minimal. In a reply to this post, different explanations were brought forward to explain why victimisation has nothing to do with being a weak character.

*Extract 7.5.2: Florence*

I must admit....Like a lot of women who do end up in abusive relationships I always said "I'd never let that happen....I'd just leave". Until you've been in the position where you're scared to open your mouth every day but you're also scared of what will happen when you walk out of that door then you can't possibly know what you would do. I'm lucky that my family and friends have all been supportive and understanding. I have been asked "how could someone like you end up in that position?!" (...) Abusers like to break strong women, that's their MO and if they can spot the little cracks that show a scared little girl hiding underneath who just wants to be loved and accepted (which they always can spot) then they prey on that woman, breaking away chunks of that strong, confident exterior to get at the quivering child inside. (Thread 206)

Florence responds to negative stereotypes about ‘the abused’ by depicting them as both ‘strong women’ and vulnerable (scared little girl hiding underneath), or just anyone, who is too ‘scared’ to leave. ‘The abuser’ on the other hand, similar to the calculating character previously evidenced in this chapter, intentionally targets her weak spots in order to break her down. Thus,

fear and precaution are coping mechanisms that ensure survival. Overall, the situations described in both Florence's and Faith's posts are extreme violence, with clear victim narratives. Such formula stories are used in the forum to respond to devalued depictions of victims in public discourse, whilst at the same time reinforcing stereotypes of extreme cases of violence. In a different thread, several women explained victim-blaming as being a consequence of societal beliefs and culture.

*Extract 7.6.1: Angel*

I've talked to only a few trusted people about what has happened to me... I've probably skimmed over most of it just saying that he was violent once or twice and ive finished with him as i dont want to make a big deal out of it. My friends and my mum have all been supportive but mostly they have all asked or implied that I might have done something to provoke it? I myself have found myself justifying his actions saying 'i probably provoked it, you know what a fiesty b..ch i am?'. When all I've done is stand up for myself when he is drinking and ranting and being threatening or intimidating. 'I somehow feel obliged to cover up for him and admit to people and mostly to myself that it wasn't all his fault. I feel like I should cover up his shame more than my own! found myself questioning this today. Is this a society thing? Is it somehow ok to hit a woman if she's provoked you? And what counts as provocation? shouting back? Making a stand against someone that's bigger and stronger than you? Or just being in the way at the wrong time wrong place? A male friend said 'hitting a woman is wrong!....' unless it's self-defence' 'did you hit him or attack him?' wtf? I am 7 and a half stone and he is 12. I am not violent and normally not aggressive... he has been in jail for assault and I haven't. Then he asked 'was it an accident?' how can hitting someone in the face be an accident? I think I reached a breakthrough on this today in my own mind. I think the rest of society has a lot of catching up to do.' (Thread 213)

Two ways that violence can be mitigated are here presented for inspection: that violence was provoked/self-defence; and that violence was accidental. Angel is attacking the gendered dynamics of blaming discourses: what counts as 'provocation' are women's attempts to stand up for themselves in the relationship, a form of victim-blaming that other people feel 'obliged' to commit to. She points out how women, including herself, feel obliged to 'cover up' the doer's guilt through the same discourses. Focusing on the construction of blame more generally removed the focus from a particular victim to the ideas behind the construction of victim and perpetrator. Angel positions herself as ahead of most people in 'the society', a place that enables a more empowered self. However, she also reinforces the idea that women's potential for using violence is laughable, a notion that minimises women's agency. Another response gives a more elaborate account on the links between social structures, stereotypes and the justification of violence.

*Extract 7.6.2: Mia*

Society, and all its constructs, supports domestic violence through a series of myths like, she asked for it, it was the drink, he had a bad childhood, he loved her so much he had to kill her...it is in the songs we listen to (Eminem), in the role models we see (Rihanna), the porn that is prolific which objectifies women, by our own stereotyping insisting that women take care of the homes and the man makes the big decisions in the house, the poorly paid jobs, the back seat, the way we - as women - view ourselves. (...) You tell your truth. Telling your truth takes time because you not ready to hear all of your story in one go. You have got good at surviving and some of that surviving means you covered up, lied, denied, minimized... These days, I don't cover for him. They ask, I tell. In little bits. Too much and I become like an enraged volcano. But cover for him, no. No more. I am still ashamed though. Ashamed I married him. Ashamed to be connected to him (we have kids)...like other people could see him, and I was blind. But it will pass. Because I am thinking that through shame, I am assuming some responsibility for what he did and who he is, and he had me well fooled. I could not have known. (Thread 213)

Mia links power differences, stereotypes and the justification of violence. Her analysis outlines how blaming is gendered, in that it derives from expectations of men and women in relationships ('women take care of the homes and the man makes the big decisions'). Here the perpetrators' blaming is connected with a social belief system as a whole, which can be linked to a feminist perspective. Other people's opinions are dismissed for being uneducated, which by default hold women responsible and excuse abusive men. This is not a common analysis within threads, but it appears occasionally: here formula stories are replaced with a more gendered analysis. Reflecting on the broader mechanism of blaming, MIA suggests that although she does not agree with victim-blame, she has nonetheless taken on some responsibility through shame. Thereby, feelings of shame and guilt are still treated as fabrications, but the primary cause is social beliefs and structures rather than the actions of 'the abuser'. Later in these threads the paradoxical nature of blaming discourse is explored and the impossibility of avoiding blame - women are blamed for staying, leaving, and returning.

Extracts 7.5 and 7.6 are examples of members adopting a common standpoint against blaming, which explicitly maps out and responds to negative victim discourses. The importance of 'bringing honour' for women with history of victimisation is a theme in Judith Herman's (2005:597) version of justice from the victims' perspectives. The community in which women are located has the power to integrate the victim of violence into a community by taking sides, and clearly locate responsibility with the perpetrator. For the women in Herman's study (2005:585), it was more important that the community took a standpoint against violence than that their abusive partners acknowledged their guilt. This 'transferred the burden of disgrace from victim to offender'.

## Locating positions between the survivor, the victim and the abuser

Another recurrent component in threads concerns how women's use of violence problematises the formula stories. The boundary between acts of resistance and abuse is not clear cut, something members became acutely aware of during court procedures. Historically, using violence goes against gendered expectations of women and traditional notions of femininity (Weare, 2013). As a consequence, in court, women have in different ways been degendered, depicted as: 'mad' or particularly 'bad' in order to 'comprehend' their use of violence. In addition, attempts to contextualise women's violence within cases of domestic violence have proposed that victims use violence because they are victims, as a reaction to previous violence. Women's use of violence, in the context of control, is presented as an act of resistance, self-defence, rooted in their own repeated victimisation (Chapter Three). Whilst this fulfils the feeling-rules for good reasons, through which violence can be mitigated, it fails to acknowledge a woman's 'semi-autonomous' decision to use violence (Weare, 2013:350). This leaves a narrow space in which to position women who do not fulfil the requirements of ideal femininity, or whose history of receiving/resisting/using violence sits between justified and not justified.

Extracts from three threads below demonstrate how members use notions of 'the victim', 'the survivor' and 'the abuser' to locate their use of violence. Julia has accidentally scratched her partner but despite this positions herself as an abuser. She asks how the incident will be judged in court, and whether this will mitigate her partner's crimes against her.

### *Extract 7.7.1: Julia*

Long story short, yesterday me + partner had an argument, and he pushed me and i grabbed on to his wrist, and i didnt mean to but i scratched it and then it bled. i feel like im an abuser, and if i were to get out of the relationship or have to go to court they would say that i was abusive as well. i feel so bad xx (Thread 16)

### *Extract 7.7.1: Jade*

Please don't feel guilty for something that was a complete accident. You've got nothing to blame yourself for and no-one else is going to take you to task for what happened ok? The final incident between my ex and myself was provoked by him screaming at (child) (..) I knew that I was going to get hit at some point so I made the decision to protect my daughter as I was petrified he was going to hurt her. I hit him first...and then I paid for it, over and over, in spades...When I spoke later on for the first time ever to a dv worker I was scared to death that it was my fault, that no-one would believe me about before because I'd never reported it. She told me that it is a quite common reaction, that for some people there comes a point where you lash out because you're in fear of your life. She was right. I went to Court and got a 6 month non-mol and an injunction with power of arrest and an

occupation order. All because of the severity of what he'd done on this one occasion. You are NOT an abuser, he is. (Thread 16)

Although Julia's behaviour was dismissed as a 'complete accident', Jade's story shows how the intentional use of violence can be justified as long as it is for a good reason. Jade's actions followed a 'decision' to use violence provoked by the urge to protect her child. Culturally, no-one would judge a mother's wishing to do so, making this a situation in which women's use of violence often is accepted (Weare, 2013). In addition, as the domestic violence worker confirmed, when victims of domestic violence 'lash out' it can be perceived as a response to fearing for their lives. In making the story support both gender expectations and feeling-rules, the moral distinctions appear to be clear cut - he is 'an abuser', and she is a victim.

In the next thread, Lucy's partner had accused her of domestic violence. Maria is first to respond.

*Extract 7.8.1: Maria*

These characters always claim DV! Mine did too. It wasn't even investigated as he had no evidence or substantiating anything to back it up (Thread 192)

*Extract 7.8.2: Lucy*

I cannot believe they have the gall to claim DV - I am fine to admit I defended myself and I did slap him round the face once. But you know I weigh 6 stone, I have extensive medical issues - he is 15st of pure muscle in excellent health seriously I couldn't hurt him if I tried. I did scream at him and I did try and stop him leaving many times - by standing in a door way in a an argument - this is probably DV and they probably put more weight on it than the damage he did to me (Thread 192)

*Extract 7.8.3: Shannon*

I wanted to say that what you described is the water torturer in Lundy Bancrofts book and my ex-husband. He deliberately provoked you into a rage to watch you unravel. Then he could say it was you, not him. Meanwhile he has consciously engineered it. Make no mistake it was deliberate, it was conscious, it was sick! (Thread 192)

Based on physical differences, Lucy's 'slap' is perceived as less threatening or real than 'the abuser's' use of violence. The physical differences, her medical condition, all lessen her ability to cause harm, and make the thought of her being accused of domestic violence ridiculous. This is a gendered assumption about women's use of violence which, nevertheless, can reflect actual differences between men and women's ability to constitute a threat (Johnson, 2011). Shannon uses the formula story of 'the abused' and 'the abuser' to move responsibility to the partner: the abuser is engineering her actions, whereas she is reacting to his - 'he deliberately provoked' her 'into a rage to watch [her] unravel'. This appears contradictory to how members have treated the idea of provocation as a form of blaming, for example in extract 7.6. Here, the constructs in Table 7.1 are turned around; he is triggering her use of violence. Reflecting the story about 'the

abuser', he has become a character immune to change. Whether this will be recognised by the court is uncertain. The reason behind the perceived necessity to turn the table around, and repudiate all agency for violence, is, as Lucy points out ('they probably put more weight on it than the damage he did to me'), the fear of losing *all* credibility in court, and having his use of violence mitigated. It is suggested here, that the massive wall of blaming that members are aware of requires a solid protection against. In this reading of her post, she perceives that a "crack" in the pure formula story of the victim may stack the odds against her. This highlights the importance of the formula stories to resist victim blame, yet they simultaneously reinforce ideas that women must be pure victims. A third and final example explicates this further.

The example below is a response to a previous thread in which a member wrote that she had made her partner move out by hitting back once very hard. A few days later Alison starts a new thread reflecting on these exchanges.

*Extract 7.9.1: Alison*

I was reading 'Clair21's' post and wanted to say I FOUGHT BACK. I fought hard. I never really thought about it (at the time) and realise now that it prob wasn't a good idea but I did fight back (.). The humiliation, the fact that I felt powerless unleashed a rage. One time, he'd smashed my head against the wall (quite bad) and [*this was followed by more physical violence*]. I was a wreck, sobbing and bruised all over and you know what he said 'i don't want to look at you, go to bed'. He turned his back on me in disgust and you know what, I picked up a vase off the table and smashed it over his head. I remember sobbing hysterically 'I'm not sorry because you deserve it after what you have done to me'. I was sorry really - in fact I was so scared and horrified that I had done it. Me....! The posts on the previous thread worry me..... am I alone or in the minority..? I assumed we'd all fought back.. What does this make me.. as bad as him...? Was I so wrong... Please be honest - the truth is what I seek even though it may hard I would rather it. (Thread 202)

Alison's action is not part of the formula story of 'the abused', but here she seeks to include it as a form of resistance. Alison is surprised that so few of the others report retaliating, leading her to ask whether her use of physical violence makes her 'as bad as him', i.e. an 'abuser'.

However, she also formulates a position somewhere between the moral extremes - to be all good or all bad. First, Alison describes her violence within a discourse of what could be read as justified or mitigated violence, because it was for a good reason. She positions herself as a survivor, a 'fighter' who stood up for herself. Her action defended against degradation, in response to humiliation, a position that can be justified in accordance to the feeling-rules. On the other hand, the uncertainty about how to actually categorise this type of violence is clear. This is an attempt to talk about the grey-zone, question the unquestionable and still be accepted as victim of abuse. Responses contained narratives where members account for why they had or had not used violence. First, a number of posts justify Alison's use of violence as an act of

resistance in relation to what he had done to her; her violence was here depicted as bravery and survival.

*Extract 7.9.2: Lea*

Due to the circumstances no. I think he deserved it. Considering he wacked ur head on a door frame chucked u down stairs n strangled you I'm surprised you found strength to fight back! (.) But no I don't think your as bad as him. (Thread 202)

*Extract 7.9.2: Alice*

i fought back too (.) it doesn't make us as bad as them, it makes us human, x (Thread 202)

*Extract 7.9.3: Emma*

I just wish I'd been brave enough to fight back! I'd never judge anyone for fighting back: and no judge or jury in court would, either. It's called self-defence, or if he's turned his back after an attack, then provocation, I guess. I think more of us would if we dared'. (Thread 202)

*Extract 7.9.4: Bo*

on two occasions I fought back...both times it took him completely by surprise and I don't know where this inner strength came from I think it was pure rage I too am 5'2 and less than half his weight but even he was surprised by my strength on those occasions. He used them against me though and tried to convince me that I was just as bad for retaliating...I used to be convinced that I'd rather fight him to the death than let him beat me...however the years of emotional abuse kicked that bit of fight out of me. I think to fight back is a natural response when you just can't take anymore...' (Thread 202)

Alison's action is both justified and made the norm for resistance to violence, giving a specific meaning to the notion of survivor as someone who fights back. Agency here is physical resistance. In these posts, strong emotions are the driving force, for example Bo shares how she fought with improbable internal 'strength', triggered by 'pure rage'. Bo gives more than justification for violence; she positions herself as a fighter in a battle, and makes fighting 'back' a 'natural', 'human response when you just can't take anymore'. Once again, provocation is used as a way to justify the use of violence, contrary to how it was perceived as blaming in other posts. When placing this sequence of posts into the context of the practice of negotiating 'guilt' and 'shame', Alison is a brave survivor, a position that would enhance self-esteem. However, as Hester shows, normalising violent resistance creates tensions which for those who did not fight back, actualises the negative connotation of the passive victim.

*Extract 7.9.5: Hester*

My body shut down while mine attacked me. I couldn't do anything - not even a scream apart from when the pain got so bad I remember a whimper. (.) I just froze. I hate him. I remember a fire in my belly when he threatened to kill me, like I slowly woke up and at that point I tried to run but he got me. Fighting back is a human reaction. It's about survival. I feel very weak that I didn't or couldn't.' (Thread 202)

Women, whilst refusing to equalise violence used by women and men, are more equivocal about fighting back.

*Extract 7.9.6: Miley*

No you are not as bad as him. He did what he did because he has an abusive mentality, and your rage at being treated like that was entirely understandable. I would even go as far as to say the bu\*\*er deserved it! I didn't fight back, but only because I was too stunned and couldn't believe what was happening to me. He only ever assaulted me once (...) 'By then I was in an incandescent rage and was sorely tempted to attack him, but something in my head told me it was better for the police to deal with it, so I called the police and they arrested him. If you've read Lundy Bancroft's book, he strongly advises women NOT to physically hit their partners, because the abuser will retaliate by hurting you even more. But you're certainly not as bad as he is xxx' (Thread 202)

Miley has two major points. First, in following the abuser discourse, the perpetrator used violence as part of his 'mentality'. Alison's violence on the other hand, was both morally justified ('the bu\*\*er deserved it!') and triggered by an understandable 'rage'. Secondly, she addresses concern about fighting back: the risk of retaliation. Her reaction was strategic rather than emotional: although fighting back is morally justifiable, it is not necessarily the best thing to do. Members discussed the many risks of using violence including the potential of being criminalised. Here two meanings of the survivor emerge. On one hand, fighting back is an admirable survival instinct; on the other, resisting the impulse to fight back is more rational, strategic, and according to Lundy Bancroft the *safest* thing to do. None, however, problematise when violence may be justified.

As mediation between the two meanings, another psychological theory was presented to account for the range of reactions presented in this thread.

*Extract 7.9.7: Lynn*

It's called the fight or flight response. Some people will freeze through fear and others will fight. Whichever way we respond doesn't make us weak, it's a normal reaction'. (Thread 202)

Within this framing, using or not using violence are psychobiological survival instincts which have little to do with personality or strength: they are automatic responses, to enhance the chance of survival. On the other hand, with this model, women's agency is reduced to a reaction. So far, none of the posts problematises Alison's use of violence. However, three members below suggest that their violence was learned behaviour mirroring the abusers, and moving the discussion towards the grey-zone between justified/unjustified.

*Extract 7.9.8: Becky*

In the beginning a fought like a tigress (I'm also 5'2" and slim to his 5'11" 14 stone) until his violence had escalated from a backhand to full-blown bone breaking, concussion causing, bleeding chaos with use of objects (wood, metal, glass). By then the priority was just to protect my head and stay alive (.)

I have also lost the plot enough to extend my rage to another person - it frightened me to see what I had become capable of and later on to see how much my behaviour was beginning to mirror the abusers. So subtle but so insidious - I have been a lifelong protagonist of non-violence having had a very brutal upbringing and yet I was beginning to accept violence as an answer. Like you I found myself asking Me!...! (.)Towards the end I would have dreams of taking a piece of 2x4 and beating him mercilessly and with absolute relish - that's when I got my backside down to the counselling service. Violence is not the answer - to protect yourself is your right but to relish it is wrong - except in dreams lol lol lol (Thread 202)

This is the first account that positions Alison's narrative as being somewhere between justified and unjustified. Violence was no longer justified but mitigated through a model of learnt behaviour. More specifically, she was both doer and the victim of violence that had moulded her way of being – 'So subtle but so insidious'. Using violence from this perspective, justified or not, can change a person such that they behave in ways that are not justifiable, and to 'relish' violence is 'wrong'. In addition, the victim is still responsible for seeking help ('that's when I got my backside down to the counselling service').

It is clear that women's use of violence within abusive relationships cannot easily fit the formula story of the abused. In this thread, women had to go beyond the formula story of 'the abuser' and 'the abused' in many different directions revealing that there was no normative model in the forum to talk about the grey zones. However, this appears to have raised further problems. When describing the abuser's violence, members are confident and often united; here members became divided by a whole range of discourses, and have to resort to a psychobiological approach to resolve the tensions, in particular of who counts as a "real" victim/survivor. Thus, there is an unspoken issue raised by Alison in this thread which cannot be comprehended through the formula stories. Namely, do women's violent acts over the course of the abusive relationship change the allocation of blame? And how would that change the idea of the abused woman or the abuser?

Members are using the same logic that underpinned blaming discourses when justifying their own use of violence - everything that once was the women's fault is now made the abuser's fault, a model that is vulnerable to any experience that moves into the grey zone. This became evident in the last extracts initiated by Lucy and Alison. In this data, whilst women respond to gendered blame, they do not always challenge the gendered assumptions behind blaming, or the accompanying feeling rules. To an extent, therefore, women remain trapped within a discourse that requires victims to be pure and free from all blame in order to have their victimisation acknowledged.

## Conclusions

In all the extracts used in this chapter members asked difficult questions about responsibility for violence. By discussing blaming as a specific abuser strategy (and related to cultural beliefs), feelings of guilt and shame are rationalised as fabricated, and made part of collective narratives. Changing the meaning of feelings of guilt and blame, i.e. changing the understanding of what causes the feelings, is a way to resist them (Chapter Two). Thus, one of the important rules inherent in the discursive perspective shared in the forum that shapes conversations is that abused women are never to blame. The meaning of enacting this rule for women, who are in the process of ending violence, can be contextualised on an individual and social level.

The enthusiasm with which ‘the abuser’ was discussed indicates that it filled a gap in public discourses about the doer of violence. Outside the scope of this chapter, were long discussions about the different mechanisms behind abuse that went beyond the formula stories, which could potentially open up possibilities for how the partner could be helped or changed. Yet, as was shown in extract 7.4, in situations when members worked with blaming, they eventually returned to the idea that the abuser was a fixed character who cannot be changed. ‘The abuser’ thus becomes a category that is a response to gendered blaming, but, with a few exceptions (threads 7.5; 7.6), is a stereotype not necessarily linked to gender.

On an individual level, making the partner a pure villain not only protects from being blamed by ‘the other’, or the perpetrator, it may also paradoxically reduce compassion towards the partner, and the difficulty and resistance of letting go of the relationship (Enander, 2011). Enander (2011) found that women did emotion work in the relationship towards either side of the double nature of their abusive partners: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Chapter Three). First they tried to ignore the cruel part of their partner, and second, women instead focused on the cruel part to minimise the temptation to try again, or stay in the relationship. In the forum, the abuser discourse has become a collective discursive tool to orientate towards Hyde, particularly evident in extract 7.4 where members investigated consciousness of guilt. This could also mean that discourse of ‘the abuser’ as pure villain is a collective and temporarily situated construct, necessary as long as women are struggling with conflicting emotions and perspectives on justified and unjustified violence.

Moreover, Chapter Three described how social networks and the communities can both blame women and take a standpoint against abuse. The importance of a community response to domestic violence for victims has previously been pointed out (Herman 2005). In the forum - an online community (Chapter Five) - members do not always find consensus, or a resolution, but through collaborative efforts seek ways to hold the abusive partner responsible for the violence. In this way, members contribute to a community response, by holding a standpoint against

blaming, and this developed into a collective sense of injustice in extracts 7.5 and 7.6 (Summers-Effler, 2002). This could have importance for those women who do not have support from friends and family (Chapter Three). There are several theoretical accounts explaining how people who identify with stigmatised social identities have built alternative forums (Goffman, 1986; Summers-Effler 2002). In this forum, women's attempts to distinguish themselves from 'other people's' perspective on violence can be explained through theories of how people cope with 'stigma' by developing alternative framings of problems in smaller groups (Chapter Two).

#### *A missing gendered framework*

Within the formula stories the assumptions presented in Table 7.1 are reversed: instead of it being something about her, it is something about him; instead of her being in control over his actions, he is orchestrating hers. However, the formula story proved to be vulnerable to questions that punctuated the simplicity of this reversal. The models of 'the abuser' and 'the abused' are solid protections against blaming, but simultaneously offer narrow positions for women to occupy. Most problematic was discussion that involved women's use of violence. Discussing grey areas proved difficult with the polarised discourses of women being all bad (as in the blaming discourses) or all good as suggested within the forum formula story of violence. At these points discussions never reached a sense of resolution and the discursive tools failed to provide a coherent framing.

There is evidence that some members seek to move beyond simple discursive narratives where comments such as 'it is not your fault' are not enough, but this is always in tension with the potential of being blamed. Thus, there is need for a space, and a discourse in which women can talk about grey areas between justified and unjustified violence without risking blaming, and about their partners' weaknesses without removing his responsibility. Berns (2001) suggests that one of the reasons why it is difficult to let go of the 'pure villains' and 'pure victims' constructs is that it would leave women vulnerable to blaming. Opening up possibilities of the partner to change also releases discourses that stress love and care as ways to interrupt violence. Thus, the formula story of the unchangeable abuser reflects the salience of such conflicts, and the need to replace them with a discourse that is equally strong. It appears that, in order for women's agency and influence in the relationship to be acknowledged, the threat of blaming must first be removed. Removing the dominant victim-blaming discourse opens up space to ask difficult questions linked to gendered practices. To a certain extent the forum appeared to be a safe space to ask difficult questions (Chapter Five) but with regard to women's resistance there was a lack of a discursive framework to do so satisfactorily; and this is not specifically generated within the forum discourse, but a symptom of a wider absence, and a tendency to simplify justified/unjustified violence in order to meet feeling-rules and avoid blame. As Berns (2001) points out, a theoretical framework addressing both men and women's violence could help to

counter this type of blame, without simplifying or falling into traps in regard to women's use of violence. On the other hand, strengthening the arguments against blaming rather than problematising it may be the priority for women seeking to extricate themselves from violence.

Women in this study proved to have a desire to analyse, and problematise, but return to and position themselves within limited formula stories because it is the best available discourse that does not subject women to blaming and meets the expectations of abused women. Finally, the ironic twist is that although within the formula story, women have little agency this occurs within a social practice that promotes women's ability *to know* (Chapter Six), and subsequently *to do*. The shift into action will be explored in Chapter Eight.

## Chapter Eight: Simple solutions for complicated lives

In this chapter findings are presented showing how members help each other realise a common goal: to end violence. The analysis examines the discursive processes in the forum at the point where help seekers meet other members' expectations and directions. Help-seekers frame their situation through different concerns and dilemmas, revealing conflicting emotions and mixed discursive suggestions on what actions they should take. In turn, helpers are employing a common practice when prompting help-seekers to take specific actions towards separating from the partner.

Concerns and dilemmas can be recognised from, and contextualised in, domestic violence theory. Women's process of ending violence is characterised by 'a cross-road' of emotions and discourses (Enander, 2008; Chapter Three). Beliefs that violence may stop, love for the partner, feelings of shame for being a victim, obligations to keep the family together, and lack of options may keep women locked in relationships (Chapter Three). Shame and self-blame can be linked to broader discourses blaming victims in different ways (Enander 2010; Chapters Three and Seven). In contrast, giving up hope (Enander & Holmberg, 2008) for the relationship and attempts to protect the self, children and others against future violence are more linked to what in domestic violence theory is conceptualised as 'turning-points'. The forum, then, becomes for the help-seekers a platform to raise concerns and expectations outlined above, whereas the helpers' role is to manage, facilitate or disrupt them. In this way, common emotional-cognitive processes are dealt with collectively in the forum.

What follows is an analysis of members' efforts to create a sense of stability and certainty in how to end violence. Giddens's (1984) concept of 'practice' is employed (Chapter Two) to clarify the regularities in members' responses. Central here is a shared discourse on violence - discursive truths - developed from the point of view that violence is dangerous, cannot be managed, and is likely to have devastating consequences for self and children. Discussion of women's agency in relation to violence reveals two strong themes: survival and victimisation. Both are approached as resources to prompt action and challenge blame: the former aims to highlight women's agency in the process of ending violence; the latter emphasises the further victimisation that may happen if there is no change. Members are thus faced with the challenge to balance, and navigate between, the meanings attached to these contrasting views.

The chapter argues that the forum is a space in which members make sense of/confess conflicting feelings, thoughts and emotions linked to turning-points, whilst simultaneously carving out and supporting a clearer direction for action. The discursive norms/rules presented are both supportive and empowering precisely because they encourage some, and exclude other

actions. However, as in all normative frameworks, this puts pressure on individuals to follow a certain path. The normative practice may be problematic and too simplistic when it is in tension with women's ability to separate, and for those who wish to stay in the relationship. The first section explores dominant discursive rules and procedures, the second how they are employed in support processes with other members.

## **A practice of ending violence**

Sixty-five threads dealt with the specifics of how to manage abuse and how to end it. Threads can run over several days with updates on the latest news and members' current state of mind. These threads contain discussions of preparations needed, information and advice on the practicalities of moving house and economic issues. Whilst all sixty-five threads form the background to this chapter more detailed analysis was undertaken on 28 threads focusing on the 'breaking up' process (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The focus in all 28 threads is questions around choices and lack of choices. Although roles are constantly alternating, 'help seekers' are distinguished from 'helpers': the former refers to members who start a particular thread and the latter to members who respond to it.

The idea of a common practice (Chapter Two) emerged from the recognition of the recurrent phrases and 'repertoires' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) through which members respond to others and give advice. In addition, the concept of 'subject-positions' (Wetherell 1998) is used to explore how members position themselves within discourses. Forum members have different knowledge and experiences: some ended violence years ago, whilst others have just started investigating their options. At the most basic level, members with knowledge of ending violence gave advice and encouragement to members who did not know what to do. However, this is not a simple, one way process. 'Forum-knowledge' on how to end violence travels between threads and is produced and reproduced through a collective discourse, and *normative procedures*. In accordance with Giddens' (1984) conceptualisation of practice, regularities in members' responses thus constitutes a common frame for ending violence: particular truths about violence; specific procedures; and subject-positions. The 'key' is to end violence.

## **Discursive truths**

Recurrent discursive "truths" about violence are repeated in the majority of the threads (Chapters Six and Seven). The notion that violence is dangerous and likely to escalate, is commonly phrased as risks alerts ('The longer we stay the more likely we are to die at their hands', Thread 20) which emphasise the possibility of being seriously hurt or killed. Similarly, members frequently repeat that abusive partners are highly unlikely to change ('we all need to keep in mind is that leopards don't change their spots' Thread 76) denying the potential to 'work

things out'. Moreover, in many threads members explain how abusive partners are always trying to gain control, and are constantly finding new ways to do so. Control is also the reason why abused women sometimes struggle to find their direction of travel ('your mind has been bullied into believing that the only person who can point you in the right direction is him, but your mind also knows that he is responsible for hurting you. You are at war with yourself, and he is on the sideline, cheering the manipulated part of your brain on' Thread 142), and why violence can appear less serious than it is ('and the manipulation we suffer makes us believe sometimes it isn't as bad as it really is' Thread 53). The final truth entails how violence between partners can never be completely separated from children's realities, and therefore children are likely to be negatively affected.

## Procedures

Linked to these 'truths', members responses include specific procedures for how to deal with violence. Central to almost all threads in this sample are regular encouragements to *report* violence and injuries, and to *seek help* from police, support services, friends and family. The single best method to end violence, and the underlying purpose for all actions, is thus to remove oneself from the person who commits it, that is 'to get rid of him' (Thread 122), which is the explicit and implicit message in many posts ('keep thinking once you are out you'll never have to see Mr Nasty again and Mr Nice isn't real is he?' Thread 117; 'there's no reason, no rhyme, just run. Run away from the bad ... him' Thread 23). In five threads this was taken to the extreme with members encouraged to end all contact with the partner by employing the 'no contact rule' ('Because abusers can contravene your boundaries forever and it is exhausting and hell, why should you have to put up with it anyway!' Thread 215). All women who have been abused are thus positioned as having the option to separate themselves from the violent partner and being entitled to help ('It can only be your decision, but there is more help out there than we all realised when we were in this situation Thread 45'; 'please use the pain - the hurt, the anger - to get away from him, not to stay with him. Take every ounce of help and advice offered to do this' Thread 50). The core message is that separating from the person who is committing violence is *absolutely achievable*, although this will not be an easy pursuit.

## Two subject positions

Reflecting the truths and procedures above, helpers locate help seekers between two subject positions. The first positions women as strong, always having options and a choice to be free from violence. In parallel to such clear agency within the process of ending violence, women are positioned as having no control over the partners' violence - it is not possible to change, influence, be the cause of, or control his actions (Chapter Seven). The two subject positions were frequently framed within collective narratives of victimisation and survival, or in the form

of personal stories communicating risks and possibilities.

Stressing the lack of control over an abusive partner's actions positions a woman on a slippery-slope, focused on the risks of 'staying', being further drawn into the partners' 'twisted' reality. Thus, separation is preferable before it is too late: 'Over time you will become ground down and feel helpless, this is the point you become trapped and the abuse escalates' (Thread 120). Others stress time wasted in a process of victimisation whilst hoping for change. The victimisation scenario was less common in this sample of threads but used as a warning, or by both help-seekers and helpers as a tool to explain the work of violence - how anyone could find themselves victimised.

A collective narrative of survival depicts the opposite scenario: a story of agency, strength and moving on. Members are positioned as being at the beginning of the long journey to end violence implying that: ending violence takes time ('It's a long road, and I'm still travelling on mine' Thread 88); and involves several stages ('go through all the stages and steps necessary towards being better' Thread 35). The rationale here is that ending violence is a process; the metaphor of a journey provides a framing in which difficulties along the way, such as returning to the relationship, are detours rather than 'failures'. Within this framing, ending violence takes time because it is difficult to accomplish, revealing the strength women must assemble whilst doing it.

The two subject positions reflect current theory depicting women's resistance to violence within the context of control (Stark, 2007:216), along with stressing women's accomplishments when ending violence (Kirkwood, 1993; Wilcox, 2006). Both are approached as means of 'frame-changing' (Thoits, 1986; Chapter Three), a form of helping others look at a situation in a more optimistic/pessimistic way. In accordance with the theoretical framework of this thesis (Chapter Two), the truths delineated above connected to both subject positions and appropriate emotions to accompany the commended actions within the forum practice. More specifically, these truths worked to: reinforce fear of future violence/harm to children; challenge hope that the partner may change; and assuage guilt for breaking up the family or abandoning the partner. All reflect conceptualisations of 'turning-points' (Enander & Holmberg 2008; Chapter Three). In addition, by locating women within a process cultivated 'hope' for a better future and 'trust' that everything will turn out well in the end.

At one level these framings contradict each other: one explains women's lack of actions through a process of entrapment; the other stresses the options to end violence. However, both narratives direct women's actions towards ending the relationship, to counteract shame for being 'a victim', and blame when violence is not ended "at first slap" (Enander 2010). This chapter will explicate how this practice - truths, procedures, and subject positions – were rehearsed in the forum.

## Formulating options, choice, and direction of travel

All help-seekers in these threads undergo a period during which they contemplate different options. Some women describe how they have been in this position for years. The extracts from forum posts below are unique in that they reflect individual cases, but the issues raised are by no means exceptional. In fact, five recurrent issues emerged: being 'stuck' in the relationship for socio-economic and health reasons; shame for being a victim or not having separated earlier; coercive control, including threats that the partner would claim the role as the main caretaker for children following separation; guilt for splitting up the family; hopes for change, and love. The sections below discuss these dilemmas and the approaches taken by the helpers to solve them. Sometimes members' support work solves discursive tensions and dilemmas; at other times it creates new ones. New tensions, whilst less salient in the sample threads as a whole, are considered in this chapter because they show clearly the work and the boundaries of forum practice.

### 'There are options for you'

The most common scenario depicted by help-seekers in posts was being stuck in the relationship. Women with children, who had been in the relationship long enough to establish socio-economic ties with the partner, found themselves isolated and lacking economic and personal resources. These women positioned themselves with little control over their situation, and often explained this as a result of bad choices made in the past. In cases where stigma or self-blame made women responsible for violence, members worked to construct a subject with choices and options on a journey towards a better future. Louise describes her 'gradual breakdown'.

#### *Extract 8.2.1: Louise*

Will anyone believe me? I have been with my husband for a total of some x years and I am ashamed to say that about x years ago I left him and returned. I went to a WA refuge, got a flat and eventually returned to a reasonable job at management level that I had worked many years to obtain. Then I made the mistake of allowing him back into my life. I was "taken" back to what had been our home some months after leaving the refuge. (.) I thought I was happy. gawd such a fool. The occasional physical burst of physical violence and daily verbal abuse, put downs, and oh the constant shouting, his moods always carrying some form of put down coupled with a constant silent threat has continued each and every day. (...) I cracked and lost my job in the November due to poor performance. So here I am again, jobless, whos going to give me a job at 55 and having been sacked? I have no self worth, no money to speak of (he gambles), it seems all my friends bar one have disappeared into the ether and I have no family support. I have gone to great lengths to hide what goes on at home and have only once visited the doctors with an injury caused by him. The prospect of having to deal with not only the move itself, leaving everything behind that is familiar to

me but also having to narrate the details, much of which to be honest I simply can't remember and beg for handouts from social services only to end up living in one room alone, well to be frank in my current depressive state, which again I have failed to talk to a doctor about is all too much, I simply can't find the strength to do it. The fall out of all this coming out will result in accusations that I am mad from him, his friends and family, I am truly scared that he will have me committed as my next of kin I believe he can do that, which is why I haven't sought medical attention for what I know is suicidal depression - and going to the police simply isn't an option, I will not do that - he last hit me over a year ago, ive never reported any incident - so how can I prove it - no one will believe me, hiding it, trying to be strong and live a normal life has sealed my own fate it seems. (.).. So ladies my message is this, if you get away, I strongly advise you never to return, else one day you wake up find your life has passed you by and you remain, as much as I hate the word, a trapped "victim" (Thread 55)

Louise provides a dense account why for her ending violence is not possible. She narrates how she, through 'leaving' and 'returning', eventually became 'trapped' in the relationship because of unemployment, lack of confidence, and depression, all products of a long abusive relationship. She argues that to receive financial help and formal support she will have to prove her victimisation. For her, reporting to the police is not an option, nor is seeking professional help for the depression, as she fears her partner would use this against her, arguing that she is 'mad'. These circumstances lead her to conclude that her fate is 'sealed'. In Louise's case, she had gone to 'great lengths to hide' her experiences from people she knew, showing the significance of the stigma that can be attached to domestic violence. She writes that she only has herself to blame for being a 'fool' to return to him years ago.

This post unveils the problematic position of victimisation: the need to prove victimisation, alongside acute awareness of the stigma of victim as weak and at fault. Louise is thus obliged to explicate not only the hopelessness of her situation, but also account for how this could have happened. Although no subject position is valued here – being a 'pure victim' (Chapter Seven), or taking the blame for what has happened – Louise chooses the latter. Maybe in an attempt to restore a damaged identity as 'a victim', and construct agency, it is not without a sense of pride that she writes that she is 'trying to be strong and live a normal life'. Thus, Louise's account involves both agency and the lack of agency: her hands are tied but she resists an identity that would evoke pity. Therefore, although Louise starts with a question which also contains hope, she ends by constructing a scenario of a dead end, beyond hope, positioning herself as a 'trapped "victim"', a word she herself detests. One reading of Louise's post is that it is within the frank confession of what she perceives as her mistakes, and the explicit awareness of 'the victim,' stigma that she constructs her agency and in this way creates space between herself and victim-blaming. Faith responds.

### *Extract 8.2.2: Faith*

you have a right to be happy and safe. Please, please contact the domestic violence help-line. you can discuss your options and they do exist. Abuse is a very erosive thing, not just violence although that is bad enough. There is the arrogant, self-righteous attitude that they have, which makes them feel they have a right to shout us down because they are always right. The intimidation and the constant threat that it might escalate. This is not normal, you deserve respect because you are you. You will be believed, but only when you talk to someone, otherwise no one knows what is happening to you. This is your first big step to getting your life back, making contact on here. Everyone is here for you. Please seek advice and stay in touch. Take care x (Thread 55).

Faith gives shape to a different, optimistic, scenario using many of the commonly used phrases in the forum: 'you have a right to be happy and safe', 'please contact the help-line', and 'everyone is here for you'. Faith confirms the significance of the violence Louise describes - her victimisation - but at the same time reconstructs Louise's position of being trapped as one of having options. Writing in the forum, and seeking formal help is seen as the starting point for claiming back her life. In fact, Faith did not address many of the problems that are raised by Louise, choosing instead to point to her entitlement to happiness and safety as a basic right. Surprisingly, Louise does call the help-line that was suggested shortly after having received a few more responses, although the refuge place offered turned out to be too expensive. Despite having positioned her fate as 'sealed' she needed surprisingly little persuasion to seek further help. It appears that the thick account of practical obstacles functioned to cover the more important barrier: shame and fear of not being entitled to help. Then, the lack of finances eventually held her back again. This is echoed in another post and a response below.

### *Extract 8.3.1: Rose*

To old and way to tired. I'm now (age removed by moderator) and my children have flown the nest I'm still stuck with my husband and really don't know where to turn. He is very abusive he gambles everything we have nothing. I work but only get a few hours a week as we have all had ours hours drastically cut. So financially I can't support myself. I'm stuck in a nightmare (..) I really don't know how to go on or how to make thing bearable. I don't have no contact with my family as he has broken all ties with his gambling lies and bad attitude. My life is a prison of this house. I was wondering if anyone else as been or is in a similar situation. .... [a bit later in a second post].... I feel anxious I feel like my head is going to explode. (..) He calls my a useless fat B. I know I am now. But once I loved life and wasn't like this. (..) I know I feel like the worlds victim but I honestly don't know what to do. I did leave him years ago when the kids were little I took them to a refuge about 16 years ago but let others talk me into letting him see the kids. I never had the strength after that. (..) I'm sorry for waffling Its my own fault because I had a chance once and threw it away. Thanks for your help (Thread 125)

Rose does not explicitly ask for help. She narrates her victimisation and describes herself as 'too old', 'tired', and 'living in a prison'; and once again age and financial hardship are barriers.

Similar to Louise, Rose excuses herself for appearing to be the 'worlds victim', a clearly negative position. At the same time, she takes responsibility for throwing away her 'chance' to be free from abuse following the semi-voluntary choice ('let others talk me into letting him see the kids') to return to the relationship years ago. She received six responses, all of which pick up on the issue around age.

*Extract 8.3.2: Eve*

steady up there with the "too old" bit...lol. ...from someone who has surpassed the half-century i can tell you it's never too old to dump an abuser...that's a combined 30yrs of abuse speaking!!!!...i am out 9 mths and life keeps getting better.....and it will for you too.....you just have to trust yourself and believe you can do it.....you have already taken a huge step by admitting your situation and coming on this forum.....now whilst he is out of the house grab a pen and paper and write down those contact numbers our Moderator gave you and start phoning.....knowledge and research is everything....gather up all the information you can...you will be amazed where your inner strength comes from once you get started... and do please be secretive and careful of your safety ...he will not be happy to learn you are planning on baling out! (..).good luck and keep us posted when you can...much love and hugs (Thread 125)

*Extract: 8.3.3: Angela*

Sadly this was my life too this time last week. I'm the same age as you and have been with my husband 25 years. He didn't have gambling issues but was very verbally, physically and emotionally abusive and it was definitely having an impact on my children. He has also isolated me away from all my family and friends. Anyway it took me months to make plans and even longer to find the courage to leave. I left last week and expected everything to feel instantly fantastic - it's been a struggle to get to this point and it's still a struggle right now but I'm really hoping eventually I'll get to the other side of the tunnel and there will be rainbows and happiness. I totally understand how hard it is but it isn't impossible if you can't carry on any more in this relationship there are ways to get out. Think carefully about what you want and then think of any ways you could achieve it xxx (Thread 125)

Eve sees Rose's main problem as lack of confidence and hope. To encourage Rose, she offers an autobiographic account of how she managed to take action even though she was older. Eve suggests that 'admitting' the situation on the forum is in itself a significant action: beginning a mission that will be completed methodically, step by step, through support. Both Eve and Angela construct a scenario in which Rose can be in control of the process of ending violence by separating herself from the partner, and slowly moving herself towards a better life; and both describe a scenario where 'inner strength' and courage come within the process of planning, making strategies, and seeking support. The envisaged hope is, however, not without the acknowledgement of the significant impact violence can have on agency, reducing life space to a minimum. Angela, who is talking from very recent experience, also admits that changing her

situation meant a huge amount of work and struggle. It is not clear from the end of this thread whether Rose changed her situation or not.

Both Louise and Rose narrate their victimisation as a result of a series of bad choices, violence, and unemployment resulting in an impasse they now try to move away from. Agency is constructed through attempts to take responsibility for their bad choices and lack of success in ending violence earlier. In contrast, linking Faith, Angela, and Eve's posts is their focus on women's agency in relation to future options and choices when removing themselves from violence. They challenge the view that change is not possible and emphasise hope. Thus, the key supportive acts in all extracts above were prompts to embrace agency, encourage *action*, and at the same time discursively disrupting constructed notions of self-blame.

However, if tangible/practical support is not in place, constructing a sense of hope and options within 'frame-changing' scenarios may not be enough. In addition, promoting the idea that women have a choice, and options, may be received as insensitive if the help-seeker perceives that separating is not possible in the short term. For example, one member defended her position as being temporarily stuck by pointing to her physical conditions 'I had a major operation (.) hence why I am still here..I have been told to stay here till my health and strength is stronger (.) A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES....BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP..and I have taken 3 big ones Please do not judge me..I am not staying by choice' (Thread 52). This member defensively narrates her survival to counter what she perceived as accusations that she was 'staying by choice' and did little to improve her situation. In other words, accounts constructed to provide agency and options to women, envisage hope, and challenge shame can be received as patronising. This underlines helpers' precarious task: to construct a scenario in which women have a choice to encourage action, but without minimising the difficulties this entails or implying that their current situation was a choice.

### 'You must leave NOW'

Around a fifth of the women draw on a scenario where they were trapped by their partners' violence and control. Some describe how they had to use computers in a library or at work to access the forum, because it was not safe to do so at home. In situations read as more immediately dangerous, discursive constructs predicting escalating violence (Chapter Six) and the possibility of death and loss are marshalled to prompt women to act quickly with help from formal support and the law. For example, Anna sought guidance for how to access support without risking more violence.

#### *Extract 8.4.1: Anna*

I give up. I can't go on, I have had enough!!! It's me that is to blame for this apparently, I can't see any way out , i need to call outreach but he monitors my phone ad time, I give up!!!

[*A few minutes later she continues in a second post.*] 'He knows what time I start and finish with only a couple of minutes grace on getting home, he checks the history on my phone calls and if it is deleted he goes mad as he can't just delete one phone call it deletes the whole history and then he accuses me of hiding things and I am not very good at lying, then he assumes that I seeing someone, he also goes through the phone bill, I just don't know what to do, last time I used a phone box someone he knew saw me and mentioned it to him, and all hell broke loose, (...) he is on holiday from work and constantly around' (Thread 197).

In this rather urgent post, Anna constructs a contradictory message: on the one hand writing that she 'had enough!!!' signalling that she is ready to take new measures to end violence; on the other that she has given up trying, as a result of the partner's constant surveillance. This is a scenario where both leaving and staying appear to be impossible options. Such posts often trigger a long series of responses, collaborative problem solving as a form of brainstorming to outsmart the abusive partner. Most importantly here, responses stress women's lack of agency in relation to the violence, but at the same time the necessity of gaining control and creating distance from the partner. The response below mirrors Anna's sense of urgency, 'when enough is enough'.

*Extract 8.4.2: Emma*

This can't go on. It will make you ill! You are so strong and brave to carry on going to work, looking after your children, doing all the day to day stuff with this intense control, monitoring of your every breath and the volatility of his behaviour... You are in a very extreme and I would say dangerous situation here. This man truly believes he owns you - every thought you think and breath you draw. And it's not getting any better, is it? Worse even? (...) Does your workplace have a health and safety policy, maybe a named person to go to with these issues? Alternatively, is there a chance to let your children's school know what's going on if they don't already? ...Other posters on here have found school and the adults there a bit of a lifeline. If you say it's a child protection issue (and it is, ultimately, isn't it?) and you need to see someone right now you could get school to call work to say you'll be late in. Once you explain about the control over your time, phone calls etc they'll take it seriously. 'Child protection' is the magic phrase that will open doors. You would be 'disclosing' - you could tell them about the incident with the slammed door on your son's toes as an example of the risk they're at - and they will have to act. You need to be aware that they will involve social services, but isn't it time you got that kind of help? It might really help to have another sane person or two to talk to (apart from all of us supportive people on here) at work, at school or at the surgery just to help you get some perspective. Otherwise it's so easy for him to draw you into the swirling scary mess that is his distorted reality. That's just three ideas - I really hope one of them works for you because you are not alone. He wants you to believe you are, he's working hard to convince you, but you really are not alone (Thread 197).

Anna's situation is framed as dangerous, a risk that cannot be tolerated. To stress the urgency and the direction of actions that must be taken, violence is depicted as 'erosive', escalating

(‘And it’s not getting any better, is it? Worse even?’), and the risk of losing control is indicated with the danger of being drawn into ‘his distorted reality’. Thus, the dominant perspective on violence highlights the risks, and the urgency of disrupting a process in which violence can be internalised (Lundgren, 2004). This shows the need to create distance from the partner. By listing three options, Lucy maps out alternative routes to seeking help. By highlighting the words ‘disclosure’ and ‘child-protection’, she signals that she understands the practice of formal domestic violence support, but without being affiliated with them. Possible sources of help are thereby managed. This is a way of exercising agency and power in relation to institutions, even if members at the same time always encourage the use of them. Later Anna does find support through the school.

The next extract explicates how sometimes an optimistic view of the police, as well as the power of overwhelmingly long lists of responses are less effective when the receiver of such messages does not trust formal services. Pearl who had just been both raped and beaten by her partner received a large number of responses encouraging her to call the police. One response is from Emily.

*Extract 8.5.1: Emily*

During your work days you need to get to the police and make a statement, do it at lunchtimes or ask for time off for appointments. You also need to get to the doctors so that you can be treated properly for other injuries. Talk to someone at work they need to know what is going on and perhaps they will let you use the phone. Maybe the police will get you looked at, by a doctor. Unfortunately honey I am new to this too. So I don’t really know which order you should do things in. I am sure the moderator will give you the best advice and tell you in which order things should be done. BUT YOU MUST RUN AND GET AWAY HON, He could KILL you. If I were you I would try and pick myself up a cheap mobile that you can keep for emergencies. Try and get as much money together and get to a refuge. Be very very careful (Thread 23).

*Extract 8.5.2: Pearl*

I’m so ashamed to admit that i haven’t called the police. i haven’t felt able to 🙄 i know i should but for some reason i just can’t. Why am i so useless? Please don’t be mad with me, i know in my heart you are all absolutely right and i need to do it but i just can’t. How were you so brave to do it?? i don’t know what’s wrong with me. My step dad was really abusive to my mum and me when i was younger and the police were rubbish. they were so judgemental and patronizing and even after an injunction and everything was in place (which he broke on so so so many times to continue the abuse) they never did anything to really help us.(.) on a slightly more positive i guess, i did manage to get to a minor injuries unit yesterday for further medical treatment (.) I’m so sorry i haven’t been able to do the things that you have advised. Please forgive me. I have listened to your words and think im gradually accepting the severity of the situation but its just complete and utter madness it almost doesn’t seem real.(.) i openly admit that I’m useless and if anything else happens to me then it is completely my fault as i haven’t sought help. I’m sorry!’ (Thread 23).

In Emily's response the message is clear, staying can mean death, and the police are the obvious agency to prevent this and to prepare for future legal procedures. Pearl's response identifies a conflict between her experience with the police as 'rubbish' and the normative way of dealing with violence by calling the police. Here, failure to follow advice from the forum once again raises feelings of shame and self-blame, with shame indicating that the self lacks the capacity to live up to the standards of a particular context (Misheva, 2000). Pearl, by her own account, had good reasons not to call the police because in the past they had been completely useless. The notion that calling the police is the best option, results in Pearl apologising and putting herself down. Thus, failure to follow advice could, ironically, trigger feelings associated with taking responsibility for the situation, which the forum, explicitly, rejects (Chapter Seven). Not following advice may also be perceived as lack of acknowledgement of the efforts made by others to help ('i have listened to your words'). In the end she finds a way out of her predicament, and remains attached to the forum for a longer period. Importantly, members did try to deflate Pearl's feelings of self-blame further down the thread, indicating that the shame expressed here did not discourage her to act, and that the forum may be a safe space to confess fears and shame, and permit others to explore them.

Generally, in Extracts 8.5 and 8.6 women's victimisation is the focus, their lack of control in relation to the corrosive impacts of violence. This is, however, set against the importance of taking control over the process of ending violence. Fear as an emotion is actually reinforced by stressing the risks of what can happen if women stay: the likelihood of escalation and further harm. In other words, women have, in writing, constructed one of the common turning-points in the 'breaking up' process (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). That is, when fear of what can happen if women stay is worse than what can happen if she leaves.

### For the sake of children

In this section members give advice and validation on what is the best/right thing to do when children are involved, sometimes leading to uncomfortable dilemmas with several conflicting discourses. The risks of harm to children or of losing them were deemed one of the turning points that lead women to take further actions to end violence (Campbell et al, 1998; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Kirkwood, 1993), although acting for children is a complex issue. It has been widely acknowledged in domestic violence research that violence does not always end with the relationship (Harne & Radford, 2008). Rather, any form of contact with the partner after the relationship has ended can mean more abuse for women and children. However, preventing the father from meeting the children means breaching family values (Hester, 2009). Because of the common assumption that a child needs both parents (Hester, 2009), fathers are rarely refused child contact, even if this results in more abuse (Radford, 2006). Morris (2009) highlights two discourses at play in these considerations: one gives moral importance and authority to fathers

but frees them from responsibility for violence; another depicts mothers as morally questionable but gives the mother responsibility for everything that happens to the child (Morris, 2009), even when the mother may have limited space to act in a situation of violence (Kelly, 1996). Morris (2009) argues that the principle that has allowed this double standard is the standing of fathers as being important for a child's wellbeing even when they are abusive.

These conflicts were addressed in the larger sample of 65 threads. A few threads focused on moving into or away from the UK without risking the charge of child abduction. Most threads, however, were completely or largely centred on managing child contact and personal safety after the relationship had ended. Posts described how the ex-partner continued to abuse through child contact including: being abusive through text messages/emails/telephone calls/social networking sites; being verbally abusive during meetings; using false claims to friends/family/her children that she was not acting in the best interests of the children; lying in court about what she had done/said (Coy et al, 2012; Kelly et al, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that forum members had developed a rather radical approach to the (lack of) importance of the father. Yet, in many of the 28 threads focused on in this chapter the discomfort of having to reject the fathers' wish to see their children was evident. For example, to avoid conflicts, Moa is planning to leave her partner without giving him any notice.

*Extract 8.6.1: Moa*

need to know I'm doing the right thing' (...)I think what I'm trying to get at, is I feel soooo guilty!!! I'm planning on leaving him, getting another house for me and my children from the council, and I won't be leaving hardly anything in the house, just what he moved in with me , with. And few extras. And he doesn't have a clue, he'll be walking in from work one day soon, to an empty house! And I'm thinking is it justified to what he has done to me over the last 7 years...I'm not playing a t\*t for tat game with him, I will be leaving and won't be coming back. And over the last few weeks, he got so close to the children. They dote on him now, whereas before, my (age removed by moderator) year old would try to stand between us and say" daddy to stop shouting at mummy, that's not nice and its naughty". And my other child would stand there screaming (age removed by moderator) year old, he knew this would break my heart. As he knows I will not row in front of the children.... I'm I doing the right thing by leaving??????? Thanks in advance' (Thread 118).

Within the normative practice of ending violence Moa is doing the right thing: taking safety precautions to avoid violence, although the partner's recently improved relationship with the children cause doubt and feelings of guilt. Guilt can be a sign that someone has done something that goes against something else he/she stands for (Misheva, 2000). In this situation, the guilt was linked to violation of the family bond between the father and his children. The 'safety first' policy included actions that in a non-abusive context could be perceived as unfair ('is it justified to what he has done to me over the last 7 years?'). However, in the forum context where many women experienced abuse during and post-separation, creating distance from situations which

could mean more violence is perceived as the best practice. Six replies including the moderator's are united in the conviction that she is doing the right thing.

*Extract 8.6.2: Sophia*

You are doing the right thing by leaving. I stayed in a relationship with an abuser for six years, the result is I have lost my children. If I had got out sooner, got the help and support they may be in their beds asleep not in foster care. The guilt will eat you, I still feel a huge amount of guilt almost a year on. However with the right support it eases. The freedom programme it fantastic, I cannot wait to join again in September (Thread 118).

*Extract 8.6.3: Valerie*

**GOOD PLAN!** It sounds like the best thing ever and don't feel guilty towards him! He owes it to himself. (..) It sounds like you have taken quite a few good steps to prepare yourself. Do you have a support network? An organisation from () to help you? Well done you! It is such a good decision, especially for you children. It is a hard journey, with ups and downs but you are making the right move! (Thread 118).

The responses emphasise the risk of suffering more violence and losing the children. This shows how resisting self-blame for violence, and creating distance from violence also shape responses regarding children. Children's safety as a guide for action was an argument used by both help-seekers and helpers. In these responses, guilt is something that can be resisted/managed through professional help ('with the right support it eases' 'The Freedom Programme is fantastic'), and coping with guilt is only one part of the many 'ups and downs' in the gradual process of ending violence. This demonstrates how the power of discursive constructs of violence *is* to create entitlement to take specific actions, whilst at the same time disqualifying others. The discursively constructed "truth" 'violence would not stop' neutralised family obligations. Moa felt guilty, but the other members act as moral supporters by reinterpreting the meaning of guilt in this context as a deceptive feeling that should be resisted (Chapter Seven). Thus, ignoring perceived obligations to keep the father informed and involved is normalised in this practice. The forum host, social services, and the Freedom Programme provided a supportive structure to achieve this goal.

Social services appear in threads as both good support and problematic. Marcy describes a day 'from hell', and this triggers a long series of messages which eventually result in Marcy calling the police, which raises new concerns involving social services. Four extracts from posts in this thread are discussed below.

*Extract 8.7.1: Marcy*

Day from hell. It began bad with an atmosphere from the minute we woke up, and it didn't get any better. He accused me of leading him on this morning but then not actually giving in to his demands [description of a violent episode that involved pushing, shouting, implicit and explicit threats...] I

shouted as I got away I am going to call the police and the kids wanted to know what had happened, but the neighbours must of heard as we were out in the garden when it happened. He says that we are over he asked me if I wanted it to be over and I said yes I can take it anymore so he is now sulking in the bedroom, he has said sorry but I said I still cant do this anymore. Oh no yet again I have ranted on and on, but at least it is off my chest and not bottled up. Thank you all for listening (Thread 122)

Marcy describes a day with verbal battles and put-downs which eventually turned into an open attack where the partner strangled her. The day almost ended in a break-up. Marcy's situation was treated as an emergency.

*Extract 8.7.2: Adele*

...Please get help, now. No one should be treated this way. You have been assaulted - a criminal act. The Police will help to keep you safe.' (Thread 122).

*Extract 8.7.3: The Moderator*

I'm not here to tell you what to do, but I feel I must add my voice to the others and encourage you to contact the police. Your situation is intolerable, potentially dangerous, and obviously harmful for the children to see and hear [*the moderator points towards options for support*] (Thread 122).

Six members prompt Marcy to call the police. By defining Marcy's day through a legal discourse, the police appear to be the natural choice of help. Calling the police is not only presented as a way to remove the threat of physical violence, it is also a chance to take control over the situation 'while it's fresh'. The moderator validates the other members' advice and adds further significance to it, by emphasising the 'obvious' harm to children. Thus, responses highlighted that the situation is not only dangerous for Marcy; they also remind Marcy that she has an obligation to keep her children safe.

In her next post Marcy writes that she has followed advice - called the police and thereby logged the evidence of violence. In other words, Marcy has now faced up to her partner in the way members advised her to, and positions herself as being in control over her and her children's safety. Slightly defensive, she clarifies that the children's safety never had been under real threat, even if she recognise that being surrounded by abuse may still be harmful. However, calling the police has created a new dilemma: the potential that Marcy's ability to care for her children will be judged insufficient, an uncertainty that evoked agony 'Can they take my children off me for this!!!!!!! I cant go through that heartbreak' (Thread 122). Several posts address these concerns, and one encourages the application of a no contact rule, this is clarified by Riley.

*Extract 8.7.4: Riley*

(...) if u keep reporting domestic violence and nothing seems to be getting done ie u are not pressing charges or you keep taking him back ss will step in and say u have responsibility to protect ur children from seeing the violence as its classed as emotional neglect to let our children see such

things (...)i was made to sign a document to say i wouldn't let my ex in the house or have contact with him when my kids were present and that i would sort a third party to pick up and drop off his kid so he could see her...i did continue to see him which i no sounds bad but i thought he would change as we all do..he beat me many times after but i wouldn't ring the police go to the drs or tell anyone as i was scared of the consequences the last time he hit me he did it (.) on the front of the house so i (.) could say he was waiting for me which he was (i didnt lie) id been waiting for that moment.(.)...i kind of feel how they (ss) handle supporting families like ours is twisted how are we meant to protect our children when we cant protect ourselves (.).. all i will say is dont take him back now so you never ever have to deal with this you are in a place were you can be free with the support you can receive if you take it (.) i promise u it will be worth it ( im sorry if iv been a bit blunt i dont mean to sound so matter of fact (.) by no means do ss come in and whisk ur kids away they try and work with you to help u make them safe but i think its something best avoided if you can and now is your chance xxxxx (Thread 122).

Riley provides an autobiographic account to bring context to the no contact rule. She describes how she became stuck between, on one hand, the point of view of the social services that her children's well-being was assured through having no contact with the partner, and on the other, attachment to the partner and the belief in his change. The important message is that staying with the decision to end the relationship with the partner would be regarded favourably: it protects her safety, her children's safety, and it can help to avoid legal and caretaking dilemmas. Most importantly, Riley points out the services that would be available if Marcy follows through with the separation, and preferably ends all contact. Thus, even though the efficacy of the no-contact rule, when prompted by the social services, is questioned, it is here still promoted to stay in control in the process of ending violence.

In this thread, as in several others in this sub-sample, it is clear that the unapologetic approach - always in favour of a separation and reliance on the police - sits in tension with the lack of guarantee and certainty around the consequences of these actions with respect to children. In two other threads, help-seekers were reluctant to separate in case they would have to share the childcare with their partners afterwards, a risk that could not be deflated regardless of any optimistic scenarios or assurances that the children would be better off without their fathers. The awareness of this uncertainty is likely to be increased further by the number of posts addressing abuse during child contact, or legal disputes about the children after separation. Here, members are more critical of the help available, and frank about their troubles post-separation. In the threads in this sample, however, the purpose of helpers' responses is to make members begin the process through which violence can end: in this context separation is constructed as a solution.

To sum up, awareness of how the abuse affects children often leads to separation (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Kirkwood, 1993). Clearly, children's well-being is a factor everyone can agree on, but pleas to call the police and to separate are uttered in the context of evidence that there

are no simple directions or immediate positive future scenarios in regard to children. The simple solutions sometimes fall short against uncertainty around the logistics and legal requirements when women have children.

### ‘This will never change’

Some women present themselves as 'ambivalent' in relation to the partners' ability to change: caught between wishing for recognition, love, belief/hope that violence would stop, and the dominant narratives of violence in the forum. This section demonstrates how members were encouraged to accept a particular “truth”: that ‘the abuser’ will never change. Overall in the data in this study, ending violence within the relationship was rarely mentioned as an option. In the 215 threads, perpetrator programmes and counselling for men were only mentioned a few times, and never directly encouraged as options without caution, as they were assumed to make men more clever abusers. From this perspective love is a deceptive feeling one ought to protect oneself from. Here, the meaning of the no-contact rule also extended to protecting oneself from the perpetrator’s influence. However, in one unusual case, the entire forum practice on ending violence - discursive "truths" about violence (violence as a form of control), the procedure to end it (separation), and the subject positions offered within it - was questioned. The post below is written from a first time writer who seeks advice on how to stop her partner from being abusive.

#### *Extract 8:9.1 Karen*

I know below does equate to abuse and I'm not asking the typical 'why does he do it if he loves me', or 'shall I leave' questions. I know what this is I'm just asking for a bit of advice as I'm being a victim of physical abuse but I'm not afraid and I still consider myself to be in control of the relationship. I've been in a relationship for a few months, I'm in my mid-twenties and he's older than me. We are both very social people (.) Most of below happens after we have both been out drinking. Straight away in our relationship I noticed he wasn't happy with all my male friends. (.) However I take no notice and still continue to see them (.) He rings and checks up on me all the time. If he does it too often in a night I'll tell him to 'get a life' (.) He also goes through my phone and emails and questions any text messages that may be from male friends. He says if I ever cheat on him he'll kill me (says in joking way). [*Description of physical violence, threats, and damage of property*] I know this is wrong and the next morning when I get the apologies I do not let him get away with it. I have quite a strong personality, I'm not a meek woman who would let someone get away with this. The next morning I will tell him his behaviour is not normal and I am not accepting it. I tell him we're going for counselling, I tell him I am going to speak to who I want when I want and see who I want when I want and the thing is I do! I have never said no to a social invitation because of fear of upsetting him, I go along the thought of 'he'll get over it'. See, I am not frightened and I don't tread on eggshells around him. (.) He doesn't control any aspect of my life. I have good friends, a good family, a good job and see his behaviour as only an inconvenience. We're moving in with each other

this week and I've already told him if he touches me (.) I'm going to call the police, and tell both our parents and tell our friends and basically have him named and shamed. (.)Any advice? I'm reading that I'm being abused but apart from the physical, which I can't ignore because obviously it hurts and he's stronger so can't stop him, the rest I take no notice off I'm strong enough to ignore his emotional taunts and blackmail. I guess I'm trying to say I'm not afraid, and I'm not really too bothered but I know it isn't right. Shall I run as fast as I can or continue to help him get over his insecurities. In this relationship he does not wear the trousers, no one does. Which is healthy. (Thread 120).

Karen describes her partner's frequent use of both verbal and physical abuse and control, but, despite this, depicts herself as being in control. Agency is constructed through her fearlessness and the many attempts to challenge violence in the relationship. Hence, she finds little resemblance between victimisation as a form of control and her experiences. Neither of the two victim-discourses identified corresponds to her perception of herself: one which sees the continuation of violence as a consequence of the abused woman's weak character (Chapter Seven); and another depicting victimisation as walking on 'egg-shells' (a metaphor often found in domestic violence theory). In contrast, although the partner's actions are identified as abusive, she does not accept that this would mean that it was out of her control ('I have quite a strong personality, I'm not a meek woman') rejecting the stigma sometimes associated with the term 'victim'. Thus, violence is separated from the rest of the relationship which is depicted as 'healthy'. Based on this understanding, Karen concludes that because she is not a typical victim, she may be able to 'help him get over his insecurities'. Whilst challenging victim-discourses, it also discredits the agency of the other members. The post provoked nine responses by other members that all expressed the opposite message: that Karen did not have control over her situation, and victimisation is a process not a character or identity.

*Extract 8.9.2: Eve*

Dearest Karen.....there is a very good reason.....why you are here on this site.....think about it please.....(.)this relationship is toxic and dangerous....many of us have started out in control of our lives and relationships....successful, intelligent, solvent, confident, sassy women.....years later we find ourselves cowed, insolvent, brow beaten, muddle headed, older women trying to reclaim lost time because of an abuser mirroring yours....is this what you really want for yourself?....you say that you are not worried now about the consequences but you soon will when he starts to erode that sassy, young, bright, smart beautiful exterior of yours.....oh and by the way (.)you cannot fix him or his insecurities...EVER....that is something we have all tried at some stage or other....In your last paragraph you ask..."Shall i run as fast as i can"?.....I think deep down you already know the answer.....i hope you make the right decision for you ..... the rest of your life may depend on it...good luck .....much love and hugs (Thread 120).

The message is clear: victimisation happens gradually and eventually results in loss of self, he will not change, you will waste your life with this man. The forum truth 'he will never change' is

accompanied with 'violence worsens over time'. A series of individual stories are recounted, but with the same narrative of victimisation, during which women change from being strong women to being women with no control over their lives, which also will be the future for Karen if she does not end the relationship promptly. This clearly demonstrates how helpers encourage others to realise that women lack control over their partner's actions. The only effective way to challenge violence is to separate from the person who commits it.

*Extract 8.9.3: Alison*

Karen please don't take offence by my words - i can say them because i was where you are now.

You're in denial.

Let me guess - 'victim' is a word you DO NOT associate with yourself - at all. That's for others, your situation doesn't fit - you're not like those weak victims who aren't in control, don't have choices..

You're not frightened because you're strong, independent, successful... ?

I'm afraid all your preconceptions are just that.

YOU are the victim or recipient of abuse.

YOU should be afraid.

Nobody starts off the damaged shell they become, takes time that does. Time and determination on their part. Usually they up their game when they have more power - like moving in together.

Putting a pillow over your face.... for 5 seconds.

This behaviour only escalates so he's made a frightening 'start game'. What's his end game? (Thread 120).

For Alison, and many others in the forum, having experience of violence gives her entitlement to be direct in the way she gives advice. Alison not only echoes Eve's narratives of a gradual break-down, she also reconstructs Karen's position of being strong and in control as being in 'denial' - a form of defence mechanism that prevents her from seeing the situation for what it is. In addition, Alison defines the appropriate emotion as a receiver of abuse: fear. This is also one of Eva's and Alison's most important messages, that Karen is not in control over violence and therefore 'should be afraid' of the sometimes fatal consequences of living with violence. In the last post by Karen, her own self-perception appears less assertive when she writes 'perhaps I'm not the 'strong' woman I think I am'. This is the opposite effect of positioning women with agency, but serves the same purpose, to encourage actions towards ending the relationship. Instead, she is now battling with the contradiction between the forum perspective that is 'SCREAMING' at her now and beliefs that the partner's violence is manageable. Although she does not appear to change her mind, she says she will take the forum members' views into account.

As pointed out before, fear of being killed is often a trigger for women to leave (Chang et al, 2010; Landenburger, 1989), alongside lost hope for the relationship (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Here, helpers encouraged to focus on risks rather than love. This is one example of how

common emotional processes when ending violence (hope, fear, love) are understood and managed, and maybe evoked through the discursive cognitive resources, and rules employed. The phrasing and delivery are unusually direct in this thread revealing that normative assumptions about violence have been questioned. However, this is not the only thread in which members' emphasise the lack of control over violence, and lack of hope for the relationship, when members do not acknowledge or prioritise their own safety.

In the final extract from Hanna who had returned to her partner, the notions of hope for love and victimisation are central. Hanna describes the end of an emotionally charged relationship, which she later returned to after having suffered greatly from the separation. One night they had an argument where he 'slapped' her arm and strangled her. He acted regretfully at first but changed his attitude after a few days.

*Extract 8.10.1: Hanna*

He seems to think everything is back to normal forgotten about whilst I'm still trying to pick up the pieces from his damage. Physically and emotionally. (.) I don't know what to do. Do I stay and give it time or do I get out and go back to the state I was in previously without him. I love him but for what he's done I hate him. I know he's going to twist it around end it with me and blame me for everything tomorrow. I just wanted him to care, like really care. He only seems to after he's done something bad. I'm in such a mess (Thread 199).

Hanna describes a common scenario of being torn between love and hate (Enander & Holmberg, 2008), and the choice between going back to the unbearable pain she felt living without her partner, and the hope for the seemingly unlikely event that he would change. Hanna hoped for love and recognition from her partner ('I just wanted him to care, like really care'). Two responses narrate both 'victimisation' and 'survival'.

*Extract 8.10.2: Joyce*

He has betrayed you with another women, he has strangled you and left you unconscious and now expecting a few day later for you to ignore this, to be over this??? for god sake, take a look in the mirror and see what you see. a bruised and frightened woman, who doesn't know what to do? Please call the helpline, report the abuse to the police. Whilst you still have the chance. You can't keep on existing like this. This is not love, its dangerous' (Thread 199).

Once again, a rather frank response emphasises the risk of further violence and the importance of recognising one's own victimisation, prompting an immediate separation, and report of violence whilst Hanna still 'has a chance'. Joyce urges Hanna to assemble the will power to regain control over the situation and end it; in doing so she dismisses the chance to receive real love and recognition from the partner by indicating that violence and love cannot coexist. The second reply reveals an internal conflict between responders, and illustrates the tensions that can arise between the two subjects positions explicated in this chapter. Amy's first sentence seems to

be directed as much to Joyce as to Hanna.

*Extract 8.10.3: Amy*

When i felt like you and was in similar situations - i got upset and more panicked when someone told me what to do. Or put their opinion on me. So what ill say is just you look after you.(.) this forum will support you in whatever you choose to do and whenever you choose to do it. You deserve kindness, happiness, smiles and health. (.)There is the hope of something better. When i was with my ex, I didn't feel hopeful. I didn't even think or want to think about a future. I focused on getting through each day, as you are now, and getting to the end of it. Tomorrow didn't exist. Now i feel terrible some days. Wish i was dead other days. But my mind considers a future. A possible happiness and something better. It is a possibility. (.) i know if i go back, ill be right back where i started. I have tried it before like you' (Thread 199).

Here, Amy is trying to solve the trouble that arises when constructing women as having no agency, which can be perceived as patronising and failing to recognise what they are doing, but seeks at the same time to keep the standpoint that a separation is the best solution. Therefore, in contrast to the previous responders, Amy does not predict a slow breakdown; rather, she presents the cheerless and pointless existence of being in an abusive relationship and defines it as a dead end, one which Hanna has the choice to, and will, abandon when she is ready. Amy gives an elaborate account of a now familiar scenario, which attempts to move from the lack of hope for change within the relationship to the 'possibility' of something 'better' - 'a future' without the partner. In this way, Amy constructs a subject who is more in control and who can ensure her own happiness, but within a scenario that will eventually lead to a separation. The discourse that women have no control over violence can effectively and with urgency delineate actions to take when facing violence, but it may also be received as condescending. This gives rise to attempts to soften this approach, through recognition that women have some agency inside the relationship. Thus, members use notions of hope/lack of hope, control/lack of control and choice, to indicate directions and prompt actions, by conveying one of two alternative futures. However, the principle structuring both narratives and all responses in this chapter is the same - violence only ends with separation.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has demonstrated the effects of sharing a practice for ending violence that involves shared knowledge, procedures and specific directions for action. The forum can thus be a place where women disclose an array of worries, concerns, and emotions when making decisions on how to end violence. Agency is performed in relation to victimisation and survival which are approached as collective discursive resources. These findings reveal the complexity of working with contrasting expectations of victimisation and survival. The lack of control within the abusive relationship was separated from the methodical and strategic practice through which a

woman can end it. The purpose of such support work was to position members with agency and options to be free from violence; but at the same time construct a scenario in which a separation was the only option. In turn, gaining and maintaining control over the impact of violence meant decisions that would ensure distance from the abusive partner. The no-contact rule symbolises such distance - the best guarantee of safety. Similarly, helpers' use, and critique, of the formal help system were aimed to facilitate interaction with such support.

The analysis in this chapter suggests that members work to facilitate and enhance the emotional-cognitive processes involved in the 'breaking up' process (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The discursive processes involved re-interpretation of particular emotions that would strengthen or weaken the attraction of alternative pathways. In particular, truths about violence were deployed to prompt women to give up hope in the relationship, and simultaneously realise the risks of what can happen when remaining in it; both scenarios are identified as turning points in the literature (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The forum discourse on violence weakened the dominant discourse on family values, thereby providing moral support and justification for splitting the family and lessening associated feelings of guilt (Hester, 2009). In addition, help-seekers' scenarios were also constructed to diffuse shame and establish entitlement for women to seek help.

However, it became evident that part of the challenge of giving clear directions of travel - that they must end their relationship decisively - involves both defusing blame discourses, and avoiding the risk of triggering more feelings of shame and guilt in the support process. Stressing both agency and lack of agency sometimes proved to be a precarious position to hold. In particular, notions of victimisation and survival could be received as either minimising women's perception of being stuck in, or ability of being in control in the relationship. Alternating the two positions frequently achieved the balancing act of avoiding a position in which members were once again made responsible for violence. Relevant here is the framework on supportive communication (Chapter Two) that must be contextualised in regard to 'who is doing what to whom'? (Goldsmith, 2008). This further explicates the findings in Chapter Five: the supporters' advice is positioned as coming from similar experience, and therefore the advice to 'leave' can be received as well-meaning rather than judgemental (Thoits, 1986).

What, then, is the difference between the discourse suggesting that women should 'leave at first slap' (Enander, 2010:21) and members' radical approach on how to end violence? The meaning of the former involves standards for equality and being a successful human being, indicating that people who fail to end violence also fail to live up to these norms. In contrast, the forum members' rationale for stressing an abrupt ending is that abusive partners rarely change. This was also illustrated from lived experiences. Arguing for a separation thus aimed to protect women from the risks and hardships of staying and trying again. This was not the same as

forgetting the difficulty of acting within the context of control and conflicting emotions. Framing ending violence as a process made space for long periods of contemplation and even returning. Helpers' attempts to construct a practice for ending violence has thereby developed from and accommodates the standpoint of the messy and conflicting realities depicted in help-seekers' accounts, which often lack simple solutions.

*Is simple necessary?*

According to Giddens' (1991), people construct a narrative of past and present to justify actions. The power of discursive truths is to support specific actions instead of others and here members helped each other to formulate their choices in a way that kept their actions within the forum practice. From this perspective, forum practice may have provided not only the rationale, but also vivid representations and images (Thoits, 1986) of what different actions may entail. The discursive narratives of victimisation and survival thereby also became representations of possible futures. A firm standpoint on violence constituted a clear direction of action and helped to envisage future scenarios, which in turn, may have provided confidence to move forward, a confidence that in help-seekers' accounts was constantly tested by conflicting emotions, thoughts, and broader societal discourses and expectations.

However, in line with previous research on online support, the normative dimension could both be received as supportive and create barriers for those who sought help (Bar-Lev, 2008; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). Findings in Chapter Five revealed that a number of women had ended their relationship directly influenced by the forum. The realisation that violence would not end, had been helpful. Others sought a more open view regarding the partner's prospect of change, and some had experienced pressure to "just leave" when they did not feel able or wish to. This chapter deepens these earlier findings showing how tensions emerged when optimistic scenarios of survival could not override logistics such as economic dependence, uncertainty regarding children, fear of calling the police, and health issues. In other cases, pessimistic ideas about change conflicted with a strong desire to save the relationship. Therefore, a normative practice in the forum may best serve those who already wish to take the direction of the forum practice, and for whom there are resources in place to support these actions. This shows the importance of the link between a virtual support forum and formal support, direct links to provide a structure that can help women realise and pursue the advice and encouragements of forum practice.

The strength of the forum in this particular part of the process may therefore be as a space in which goals can become more defined, and directions more clear-cut by providing a platform to off load, and subsequently simplify the complexity that ending violence may entail. At such times the forum becomes a tool to retain confidence in, and to follow through, actions that to some extent are already desired: it appears that the forum acted as an ally for women to stay in

control of the process of ending violence whilst dealing with conflicting discourses, all managed within a common practice.

## **Chapter Nine: Conclusions: A reflexive space to define, confirm and change the meaning of experience**

This thesis explored the use of an online support forum on domestic violence, contributing to original knowledge in several ways. The preceding chapters mapped out some of the previously unexplored possibilities and limits of online support, and, above all, raised new questions in an area of research that is still in its infancy. In the conclusions, the most important findings are discussed together and new areas of research are proposed. The general aim of the thesis was to research the role of online support for women in the process of ending violence. Chapter One outlined how, in this thesis, knowledge is treated as a collaborative construct between people, situated in people's specific realities. At the same time, this chapter explained how knowledge is understood through discursive constructs. In Chapter Two the forum was framed as a reflexive practice dealing with discursive conflicts and dilemmas, which have the potential to enable women to feel entitled to act for their own safety. Chapter Three presented relevant theory and research on domestic violence and social support for abused women. This study takes a gender perspective on domestic violence and frames women's efforts to end violence as an emotional-cognitive process. In this process social support is often crucial in order to counter normalisation and coercive control. Whilst a woman's informal social network may be the first to know about violence, support is neither always forthcoming nor comfortable to accept, and often uninformed. In this context online support offers a space to seek help detached from a woman's social network and a platform through which to become more educated on domestic violence. The few existing previous studies on online support on domestic violence are limited to text-analysis (Hurley, 2007; Lindgren, 2014; Westbrook, 2007). Thus, this study is the first to adopt a mixed-methods approach, exploring the topic from three perspectives: textual analysis of posts; a survey of members; and interviews with forum host and moderator, both staff members at Women's Aid. Discursive and thematic analyses of posts are supported by, and contrasted with, the perspectives of the forum members and the two professionals. In this final chapter the six research questions are revisited and the main findings summarised. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the forum as a reflexive space to define, confirm and change the meaning of experience.

### **Revisiting the original research questions**

*What were the goals behind the initiative of one online support forum, and how was it developed?*

The forum was created and maintained around the principle of providing a non-hierarchical,

exclusive space for mutual support between women with experiences of violence (Chapter Five). It was a conscious effort to increase the resources available for women living with violence and dealing with its aftermaths. Rules and regulations were developed through the challenges of running the forum, seeking to balance responsibility for women's safety and women's self-determination, including within the forum. Women's Aid sought to meet a broad range of support needs, while optimising time for those in immediate need and maintaining a separation between mutual support and professional support. Whilst other professionals are excluded from membership, moderators step in when considered necessary to protect women's confidentiality and ensure that advice is accurate.

*What are the experiences of the forum as a means of support from the perspective of the members?*

The meaning and use of the forum varied among members, who were diverse in age and at different stages of dealing with violence. Some explicitly named it a group or community. Others highlighted the value of a space for seeking information and finding professional advice and guidance. The forum was experienced as an emotionally safe space to disclose because others with similar experience could understand the complexity of violence. At the same time many survey respondents were concerned about their anonymity being compromised, and especially their use of the forum being discovered by abusive partners. A minority thought the conversations were too regulated by moderators, and/or other members too opinionated, but most valued the security of moderation, especially when members were perceived to be in dangerous situations.

*Which themes and topics are dealt with in one online forum on domestic violence?*

Members dealt with a broad range of topics linked to the process of ending violence, including: definitions and understandings of violence; living with violence; taking action to end violence (including court and child-contact); the aftermath; information and links to books and media.

*How do forum users perceive the impact and relevance of these themes?*

Findings from the survey data revealed that the members believed that their writing and reading on the forum had influenced them in different ways. First, the forum had increased their understanding of domestic violence, extending it to encompass many forms of abuse and control; especially significant here were explorations of emotional abuse as a real form of violence. Second, members addressed feelings of self-blame, and this had helped shift perceptions that violence was, at least in part, their fault. Third, the forum had influenced actions towards ending violence, including seeking professional support/legal advice, and separating. All conversation topics were relevant because they were chosen by the members. However, the scope of conversations, which were limited by the forum host to self-experienced violence, became too narrow for some who sought a space for wider exchanges. In addition,

some thought the perspective on ending violence was too limited, with leaving as the only option.

*How do members construct emotions, violence, victims and perpetrators in written postings?*

Chapters Six to Eight deal with this question in-depth. Immersion in the forum and analysis of a sample of threads shows that members create and draw on a dominant framework on domestic violence, acquiring a situated meaning of violence through sharing and reflecting on experiences. Several of the common ideas about violence could be linked to the Power and Control Wheel: violence as a complex pattern beyond physical acts; violence as a way to gain control. Other common notions were that violence often escalates, and violence is likely to affect a woman's perception of self. Some stereotypes were affirmed and others critiqued. Whilst the core ideas about violence reflect a feminist perspective, members also demonstrated a pessimistic view of the abusive partner's prospect of change (Chapter Six, Eight). Agency was both emphasised and minimised within constructions of survival and victimisation. In addition, normative assumptions about emotions were central in common narratives: which emotions are common as a consequence of violence (fear, guilt, shame); which emotions should be focused on in relation to the partner (fear of future violence, hope of something better without the partner); and which emotions should be resisted (guilt, shame, love, pity, compassion, hope for the relationship).

*How do members use violence discourse in support processes?*

This thesis argues that members use violence discourse as a tool to deal with three interrelated, predominant themes. First, violence discourses became a discursive tool to name and verify the existence of violence, whilst defusing gendered expectations. Second, formula stories of 'the abuser' provided a framing to reinterpret feelings of guilt and shame as false indicators of responsibility, and to challenge victim blame more broadly. Third, violence discourse was linked to a common discursive practice of guiding members to stay in control in the process of ending violence, and suggested a clear direction for action. At the same time, the idea of survival as a process sought to challenge blame for not having been able to 'just leave'. More generally, it was argued that support processes employed the dominant framework on violence to manage, interrupt, and facilitate common emotional-cognitive processes found in the process of ending violence (Enander & Holmberg, 2008).

How, then, can the role of the forum be understood? In this thesis, support pursued in the forum is approached from a discursive perspective, as being a practice of reflexive work (Chapter Two); and the role of the forum can be contextualised in the literature on domestic violence discussed in Chapter Three.

## **A reflexive space**

A space to define meaning can be as crucial in the process of ending violence as other more tangible forms of help, and this study has demonstrated how and why. Forum members worked on the meaning of experience: what violence is; who is to blame; collective narratives of victimisation and survival (Chapters Six-Eight). Such reflexive work is here understood as a collaborative endeavour to strengthen particular knowledge.

In the discursive framework applied in this study power is, amongst other things, the ability to change the meaning of experience (Weedon, 1997), and entitlement to specific actions (Foucault, 1980; Giddens, 1984). In turn, knowledge gives agency and entitlement to act within a specific perspective. Within this framing, it has been argued throughout this thesis that the forum is a space to develop explicit knowledge of the process of ending violence at times when discursive conflicts and dilemmas involving gendered expectations created uncertainty about the core aspects of violence (for example between old and new concepts of violence, family obligations, expectations of love). Here, members provided a form of coping assistance (Thoits, 1986), helping others see their situation through a forum-defined discursive framework. Members helped those who sought input to validate their situated meanings of violence, presented solutions to problems, and gave moral support in situations when obligations and responsibilities made taking action complex. Thus, in this support forum finding a sense of certainty in 'what' and 'how' constitutes the primary source of agency. Four aspects of this process are discussed below.

### *Challenge normalisation and coercive control*

Chapter Three proposed that an online support forum could help women increase their 'space for action' (Kelly, 2005) by opening up potential for meaning-making, help-seeking, and access to different discourses on violence. It was further suggested that this could help women to counter isolation (Stark, 2007) and the normalisation process (Lundgren, 2004). The findings gave some support to this hypothesis. The forum had become an additional social network and support for participants, and it had changed their understanding of violence, one of the central processes when leaving an abusive partner (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). However, analysis indicates that the impact of reflexive work must be connected with broader societal discourses, not just coercive control and normalisation of violence within the relationship. Women's reflexive work with meaning did not only counter the perspective of an abusive partner, but rather members were equally dealing with conflicting discourses, ideas about victims received through friends, family, the invisible "other" voice, and within the internal dialogue with the self. After all, entitlement to use violence, and the impact of acts/utterances intended to harm rely to an extent on broader discursive power and structures (Connell, 2009; Hearn, 1998; Chapter Three). Thus, discursive struggles are everywhere (Weedon 1997), and members' efforts to counter

normalisation within the intimate relationship included strengthening a broader, critical perspective on violence and gender relations that reflects a critical approach to common understandings of domestic violence, myths, and stereotypes.

#### *Developing a critical perspective*

The forum discourse on violence is a form of counter discourse (Weedon, 1997) to the dominant ideas of violence, 'the abuser' and 'the abused' in public discourse. In Chapter Six, this meant to insist on a perspective on violence that goes beyond hitting, to recognise coercive control, emotional abuse and gendered double standards in the relationship. In addition, Chapter Seven focused on victim blaming, which sometimes led to an analysis and critique of negative stereotypes about being a victim. The forum enabled reinterpretation of feelings of shame and guilt, reframing them as a product of violence and/or injustice rather than individual moral shortcomings. In Chapter Eight, narrating leaving as a process further challenged shame for being a victim or having returned. The focus of many posts on critique of blaming underscores the value of accomplishing an emotional safe space for disclosure of doubts and conflicts. These chapters reveal that a critical perspective has developed in the forum, creating room for both explicit criticism, and reinforcement of stereotypes (more on this below).

#### *Facilitating turning points*

The process of strengthening specific knowledge also changed emotional states through discursive constructs, and encouraged action through frame-changing scenarios. Such framing and impacts can be understood through what is described in the literature as 'turning points', a specific point in time and space in which efforts become more focused on ending violence (Chang, 2010). The advice and arguments analysed in Chapter Eight were centred on enabling women to reach and maintain such realisations. More precisely, common discursive 'truths' about violence encouraged women to give up hope in the relationship, and acknowledge the risks/harm to self and others: both realisations have been found to be central in 'the break-up process' (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Narratives of survival and victimisation further strengthened the argument, by positioning women as having control of the process of ending violence, but without control over the violence itself. The concept 'turning point', however, suggests that there is a singular moment of realisation. The thesis shows that members worked continuously to secure a strong conviction of what their experiences meant, and what actions to take for themselves and for others. The reasons, arguments, and feelings involved in a separation were reinforced and reaffirmed again and again in stories of survival, and through the common discursive framework. The practical option to dip in and out of an online forum as needed, enabled this process to continue over time – making it a place to gain, and regain confidence in 'what' and 'how', including after the relationship ended. This may be especially important when trying to get free from violence in a context that does not support a separation

(Chapter Three).

*A situated knowledge and practice*

The production of knowledge in this forum emerges from members' specific realities, knowledges, and experiences, which includes dealing with violence and blaming discourses, conflicting identities, and engagement with multiple legal and support agencies. A form of practice has developed through collective knowledge on violence, how to detect it, and how to end it. The key was to carve out a normative practice that worked: actions that were useful (no-contact rule/separation); which feelings and expectations to ignore (family obligations, guilt, and shame); and identifying channels of help (Chapter Eight). In some cases this required narrowing down complexity, for example, by making leaving the only option to defuse other obligations. Other engagements increased complexity by exploring both what counts as violence and the process of leaving, to diffuse expectations to 'just leave' or narrow views of violence as 'hitting'.

What has been demonstrated is that, in this space, there were normative discourses dealing with the specific issues outlined here, and that these discourses were employed to deal with the specific social and discursive pressures in women's lives. This is the meaning of a situated knowledge and practice drawn on in this thesis (Chapter One and Two). Here, knowledge is presented as a temporary construct between individuals sharing a similar reality from the baseline of what needed to be done. One of the limits of this study is that it was not possible to analyse the fluctuation and multitude of ideas from several thousands of members. What this analysis has identified are the dominant themes. Among the population of forum users are also likely to be individuals who take a different approach to violence and its meanings.

The findings indicate that an online community can be a powerful force, a space that mobilizes a great variety of individual experiences into a practice, and influential enough to validate knowledge that is counter to common-sense public discourses. I argue that this is one of the powerful roles of an internet forum on domestic violence: it becomes an emotionally safe space in which women can define and categorise experiences to strengthen a particular perspective and thereby gain a sense of control over an experience that is often characterised through the lack of control (Chapter Eight). As shown in Chapter Five, this form of reflexive work had a real impact on members' processes of ending violence.

Moreover, the role of the forum to expand knowledge of violence reveals that understandings of violence beyond physical assault need to be strengthened in public discourse (Wilcox, 2008). The dominant public representation appears to be repeated beating, and there remains uncertainty around what emotional/psychological abuse actually means: where the boundary is between such forms of violence, gendered expectations and everyday arguments/disputes. This

finding suggests weaknesses within the concept of emotional/psychological abuse, and the need for clarification, in terms of what abuse is, but also what it is not. This is a complex task since what counts as abuse for the individual may be situational (Dobash & Dobash, 2004) and cultural, but this could nevertheless contribute to the acknowledgment and understanding of these forms of violence as unacceptable. Women in the forum pursued this form of analytic work themselves in the context of their own lives, by, for example, pinning down the intention behind acts and utterances as signifiers of abuse (Chapter Six). Determining the boundary between abuse and non-abuse required members to carry out detailed analyses of the situated meanings of acts and utterances and the partners' sense of entitlement, rights and expectations in the relationship, and to map abusive behaviour and situations over time. Thereby, they demonstrated sharp and context-sensitive analytic skills to detect and give meaning to situations of harmful and threatening acts, not easily conceptualised or defined as domestic violence.

## **Stereotypes, norms, and safety**

The forum framework itself constitutes a normative discourse, and previous chapters have shown that this had the potential to exclude potential members and limit what could be known.

### *Need for more complex models of 'the abuser' and 'the abused'*

Narratives of 'the abuser' and 'the abused' provided guidance for understanding the core elements of violence and challenging blaming. However, formula stories of 'the abused' and 'the abuser' carry the danger of creating new stereotypes, some of which had emerged in the process of moving away from blaming discourses.

Although the forum perspective of violence, as a way to gain control and power, was useful for understanding some mechanisms behind domestic violence and violent strategies, the central character, 'the abuser', in its simplification, became an extreme character, less than human. The idea of a pure villain precludes possibilities for change, hides the ordinary man who uses violence. In addition, it was argued that members could be restricted by a discourse that suggests that victims must be pure to have their victimisation acknowledged. This creates a gap within which there is no framework to understand women's use of violence, whether in self-defence or retaliation (Chapter Seven). Paradoxically, in order to fully acknowledge victimisation, it appears to be necessary to get rid of the pure victim discourse, and replace it with a more complex model that can accommodate both victimisation and agency (see also Kelly et al, 1993). These narrow models of 'the abused' and 'the abuser' may, in part, reflect how the framework provided by practitioners (and researchers) is itself a simplification of reality, a model to work with (Loseke, 2000). They may also indicate that ideas and theories have become simplified whilst circling on the message board.

The same principle can be applied to the findings regarding norms of how to deal with violence.

The forum was a space to explore the complexity of violence, acknowledge that ending violence is a messy process, but with only one favoured route. This was confirmed in Chapter Five in which a few survey respondents revealed a reluctance to post again if they felt pressured to end the relationship when they were not ready to. In addition, in Chapter Eight, frame-changing scenarios intended to envisage hope and agency were found to create additional pressure to achieve a social change for women who were not necessarily able to act on these scenarios, especially those for whom the barriers included economic dependence and/or health issues. This suggests limits of online support and further indicates the value of a link to more tangible support through the helpline.

Whether ideas, opinions and positions are more extreme in online support compared to offline survivor groups is a question outside the scope of this study. The findings in this thesis underline both the weaknesses and the strengths of constructing models of violence and images of the people involved (Hacking, 2000). Constructing new, more complex multilayered models of ‘the abused’ and ‘the abuser’ may help abused women in their process of making sense of their experiences, but they may at the time be less effective in promoting the actions needed to separate from a violent partner.

#### *Support for everyone?*

Furthermore, whilst community qualities and friendships became a supportive structure in themselves, a minority of members felt excluded by the close friendships on the forum (Chapter Five). As argued by Lindgren (2014), close groups of long term users were crucial in providing experiential expertise to newer members. Yet, at the same time such tight-knit groups could be intimidating for less integrated members. As was pointed out by the forum host, reinforcing a negative perception of self may disrupt a process of ending violence rather than facilitate it. This is concerning in light of the fact that, for some women, the forum had been the first place where they disclosed violence. Most survey participants were frequent forum users, and thus had been part of shaping its norms and rules. The question that remains is to what extent the impact of the forum depends on high levels of engagement. The population of women who do not have the possibility to engage in this form of support remains unknown.

#### *Safe online?*

The last issue concerns the medium itself. Almost half of the sample had felt anxious about losing anonymity, especially being found by an abusive partner, a fear that was not unwarranted. Even if such incidents were rare, it had happened that partners had logged on and written abusive messages on the message-board. It is also revealing that many survey respondents did not feel entirely safe. Further research is needed on how to increase the safety, and the feeling of safety, in online support forums.

It is still largely unknown why people exit the forum. This is a question this study could not address. In addition, to further map the boundaries of the forum, future research should more systematically investigate 'who' is populating support forums on domestic violence.

## **A practice ahead, and behind the scenes, of formal support**

The findings of this research locate the forum as a support practice that works behind the scenes of other support, but also before other support is accessed: it can thus facilitate interaction with other forms of support.

There were many links between forum support and seeking/accessing other support. First, the forum itself was created, and maintained as part of the work of a formal organisation aiming to improve women's safety, and this created a physical closeness in the virtual space to other support opportunities. Second, Chapter Five showed that women sought help in the forum both before and alongside seeking more formal support. The forum filled gaps when other support was not available, served as a platform to ask where to seek further support (Westbrook, 2007) and also built confidence to talk with others, including friends and family. Third, Chapter Eight showed members tended to be optimistic about professional help, and routinely encouraged others to report violence to the police. In addition, moderators consistently worked to help women access formal support, and provided advice themselves. Fourth, in Chapters Five and Eight it became evident that women's support work dealt with the questions that arose before and after meetings with support workers, the police, and social services: to inform about possible outcomes and scenarios; to explore doubts about eligibility; and discuss fears, and consequences of, for example, calling the police. Finally, Chapter Five confirmed that, influenced by the forum, many women had taken further steps to seek help and appreciated professional advice from the moderators.

As outlined in Chapter Three, and demonstrated in this thesis, disclosing abuse is not always unproblematic, it involves social risks: many women lack trust in state agencies. This sheds light on the function of an anonymous social environment where being able to voice these concerns may be crucial for some women before engaging with agencies. An earlier study by Waldron (2000) questioned whether mutual support online could create a collective negative attitude towards professionals amongst those who participate. The findings of this study mostly pointed to the opposite, even if sometimes encouragement to call the police was mixed with criticism and warnings about the involvement of social services. This is in line with a later study which found that people who were particularly anxious and lacked trust in professionals went online to discuss meetings with physicians (Bell et al, 2011). In this way, online support can have a role in enabling women to consider, manage and get the most from their interactions with support services, and state agencies. An online forum's role and impact on members'

engagements with formal support and state agencies is an important and promising area of research that could be explored in future studies.

#### *The forum as individual/mutual support work*

The last theme to address is the level of support work, insight and analysis that women display in the forum for themselves and others. Thanks to the methodological approach, this study analysed unique data, which provided a real-time representation of the work women undertake in the process of ending violence: learning about violence; developing strategies; contemplating decisions and dilemmas; and last but by no means least, helping others. In this way, the analysis contributes to demonstrating women's agency far from the idea of victimisation as learned helplessness (Walker, 1977). In contrast, what dominated in women's reflexive work, and the cognitive-emotional processes displayed here, was strategic work, and a great amount of knowledge of the process of ending violence, involving: careful risk assessments; the negotiation of social/ discursive pressures; and intensive support work. All these aspects are manifestations of agency - a desire to make an impact, and to stay in control of the process of ending violence. The findings, therefore, provide evidence of the amount of responsibility these women took for their own safety, and for obtaining a future without violence. All this to put an end to, and recover from, violent acts inflicted by someone else.

The forum thus, is not a support service in the form of a one-way provision from support-givers to support-takers. Rather, it is a platform for abused women to help themselves with others. The online forum in this study became a tool to carry out the work these women may have otherwise pursued largely on their own. One of the strongest themes in Chapter Five, experiential knowledge, became the foundation for the support. After all, who would be more equipped to know the reality of those who are ending violence than women who are in the middle of it? An online support forum is therefore essentially a medium and space that makes this unusually easy.

In conclusion, one of the strengths of the forum is its separation from, and at the same time, connections to other support. This thesis has shown how an online support forum can be part of a more long-term, flexible and holistic intervention beyond the linear idea of ending violence as leaving and moving on (Kelly et al, 2014).

## **Final reflections**

This study has generated original knowledge about a largely unexplored area of support work by and for women living with domestic violence. The analysis and findings provide valuable insights and suggest further research. They identify a new mode of support in which abused women can explore the meaning of violence and find useful information about support services. The findings show the impact of an online space for reflexive work, where women with similar

experiences can support each other whilst creating a critical discursive perspective on managing conflicting identities and cultural expectations of women, and victim-blaming. Finally, the three data sources allowed findings to be confirmed by the members themselves, and this shed light on the impacts, possibilities, tensions and limits of online support.

Future research could go into multiple directions. For instance, whilst this study focused on the positive aspects of this form of support, some of the limits might prompt more research questions. Moreover, future studies may continue to discuss and explore how to research these forums in the most ethical and successful way, using and benefiting from the challenges and approaches described in Chapter Four. Overall, despite valuable contributions from Hurley (2007), Westbrook (2007), and Lindgren (2014), research on online support for domestic violence victims lags behind in comparison to other topics. This is surprising considering that researchers have sought for novel support initiatives capable of supporting women in a range of contexts (Kelly 1996; Wilcox, 2008).

The online forum examined in this study proved to be such an initiative. Similar to off-line survivor groups, its aims and functions are to enable women to take control of their lives and talk about their experience from a specific perspective (Kasturirangan, 2008). However, this forum remains fluid in its structure and meaning. It is an everyday space to write and connect, it has no formal point of entry or exit and topics addressed depend on the specific people involved at each point in time. In other words, alternative/additional forms on online support are yet to be explored. Moreover, the experience of developing the forum (Chapter Five) indicates that, whilst support is primarily driven by members themselves, maintaining a supportive structure through moderation put financial demands on the forum-host. Online support is free and easy to access, but hosting the site is not.

This thesis shows why more research and financial investments should be made in this area. The findings demonstrate that online support is highly valued as an always available mostly safe space for women to meet, explore and reflect. Indeed, it can be seen as a new initiative but with promises of a much broader application.

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# Appendix list

## Appendix 1: Invitation Letter

### **Message from the moderator: Invitation to feedback on the forum**

Women's Aid have joined up with Karin Berg from London Metropolitan University hoping to find out how you use the Survivors Forum and how it could be improved. Karin is conducting a wider piece of research for the Child Women Abuse Study Unit (CWASU) at the university and, by taking part in the research, Women's Aid would receive a specific report on the Survivors Forum. We would use this to better understand how you benefit from using the forum and identify areas for improvement, as well as to help us seek future funding to keep the forum going.

We have often invited feedback whilst the forum has been growing, and we would like to keep doing this in a more in-depth and structured way. We hope that by taking such opportunities to work in partnership we can really achieve something that's informed by - and useful for - you.

### **Interested?**

The survey, which takes around twenty/thirty minutes to complete, asks about your experiences of using the forum, whether and how it has helped you. We are interested in responses from all members over 18 regardless of how much/little time you spend in the forum, or how often/little you post.

**For more information about the study and/or to participate click on the link below:**

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/DDHTBPB>

Thank you for your time,

The moderators

## Appendix 2: Online Survey

### Before you start the survey

Thank you very much for being interested in this survey. Before you start, please read through the information below. If you still have questions after having read it you can contact me on email [REDACTED] or telephone [REDACTED]

/Karin

#### Consent form

- What is this research about?

This study aims to investigate how domestic violence survivors are using support forums to get social support during and after domestic violence. It will help answer questions about

- The meanings of online support for people using it
- How satisfied users are with online support.

- What will the research be used for?

There is very little known about online support amongst domestic violence survivors so the findings will be important in this way. They will be used to make recommendations on how to best use and develop internet based support. Women's Aid may also use the findings to help them improve the forum and seek future funding to the forum.

- Who will be conducting this research?

I will do all of the research. I am supervised by Professors Liz Kelly and Renate Klein both of whom are experts in this field.

- Who can participate in this research?

All members of the forum who is at least 18 years old.

- Does the participation involves any risks?

No risks are anticipated for taking part in this study. If you feel discomfort during or after taking part you can call the national domestic violence helpline on 0808 2000 247 (run in partnership by Women's aid and Refuge).

- Will I be named in the research report?

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. No-one will be named in the research report and only the researcher and her supervision team will see your survey responses. Your answers will be entered into an anonymised database.

- How will my comments be used?

If you agree to this, I may use extracts from your comments from the qualitative part of the survey as quotations in the dissertation or future publications. However, none of your comments can be traced back to you. If you have written any personal information such as geographic locations, dates, names, this will be disguised. Please also note that I am looking for themes across the whole group of respondents and not responses from single individuals.

- Can I withdraw from the research if I change my mind?

Your participation is voluntary. You can also interrupt your participation at anytime by simply leaving the website.

- If I chose to not participate will this interfere with my activity in the forum?

No it will not interfere with your use of the forum in any way.

- Can I have a copy of the research findings?

A summary of the result will be made available on Women's Aid's website. If you would like this summary personally send to you please email me and I will send it to your email as soon as the project is finished. You will find my contact details below.

- Who can I contact about this study?

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the research project. You can contact me by email [redacted] or telephone (office): [redacted] You can also contact my supervisor Professor Liz Kelly by email l.kelly@londonmet.ac.uk.

**\*1. By starting this survey you acknowledge that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood the above, and consent to participate in this study.**

- Yes, I consent to participate
- No, I do not consent to participate in this study (you can exit the site by clicking on the exit button on the top of the screen on the right hand side).

**\*2. May I use some of your comments in a doctoral dissertation or future publications?  
Note that personal information will NOT be used.**

- Yes
- No

## Part 1. Basic information and your background

**\*3. How old are you?**

- Under 18
- 18 - 29
- 30 - 39
- 40 - 49
- 50 - 59
- 60 or older

**\*4. How would you describe your ethnicity?**

**Basic Information and your background**

**\*5. What is your country of birth?**

**\*6. What is your country of residence?**

**\*7. How would you describe the area where you live?**

- a city
- the outskirts of a city
- a smaller town
- the countryside

**Basic information and your background**

**\*8. What informal or formal support services did you use before getting in contact with the forum?**

- none
- police
- domestic Violence services for example refuge
- social services
- health services
- places to worship
- the national domestic violence help-line
- the local domestic violence helpline
- formal support such as counseling
- other online forums/sites related to or focused on DV
- something else, please tell me what

**\*9. What informal or formal support services did you use during the time you have been a member of the forum?**

- none
- police
- domestic violence services for example refuge
- social services
- health services
- places to worship
- the national domestic violence help-line
- the local domestic violence help-line
- formal support such as counseling
- other online forums/sites related to or focused on DV
- something else, please tell me what

**Part 2. Accessing the forum**

This section will investigate your general activity and how often you visit the forum

**\*10. What was your experience of internet forums before signing up to the survivors forum?**

- I had been an active member in at least one other forum
- I had some previous experience with internet forums
- This forum is the first I have been engaged with
- something else

**11. How did you first learn about this forum?**

- From someone I knew
- Someone from DV support services informed me about the forum
- I searched for information on domestic violence on the web
- I searched for a support forum on the web
- I was browsing Women's Aid's website
- something else

**Accessing the forum**

**12. Approximately how many weeks/months have you visited the forum (as a member or non-member)?**

**\* 13. On average, how often do you visit the forum?**

- Once a month or less
- several times a month
- several times a week
- everyday
- several times a day

**Accessing the forum**

**\* 14. Do you post in the forum?**

- Yes I have started a new thread
- Yes I respond to others
- Yes, I have both started a new thread and responded to others
- No I just read what others post

**Accessing the forum**

**\* 15. How often do you post (by starting a thread or responding to others)?**

- Once a month or less
- several times a month
- several times a week
- everyday
- several times a day

**Accessing the forum**

**16. Please use this box to describe any particular reasons why you are not writing posts**

**Accessing the forum**

**\* 17. Do you feel safe using the forum?**

- Yes always
- most of the time
- sometimes
- no never

**Accessing the forum**

**\* 18. Why do you not always feel safe using the forum (tick all that apply)?**

- I am afraid my abuser will find out about my activity in the forum
- I am afraid to lose my anonymity online
- The forum is not always a safe place (you can describe how on the next page)
- Because of something else. Please tell me here

**Accessing the forum**

**\* 19. Why is the forum not always a safe place?**

**Accessing the forum**

**\*20. Are you ever irritated by spam, unrelated postings or links published in the forum?**

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- All the time

If you have encountered any, please give examples of such posts here

**Part 3. How is the forum helpful?**

I would like to learn more about how these forums are useful to survivors of domestic violence. The next sections cover general support; making sense of domestic violence; taking action to end abuse; and the process of moving on.

**\*21. Here are a number of statements, please tell me how accurately they reflect your experience of the forum. For each row, choose one of the alternatives: almost never true, rarely true, occasionally true, often true, almost always true.**

	almost never true	rarely true	occasionally true	often true	almost always true
The forum is a place where I can "let off steam" about emotions/problem.	<input type="radio"/>				
I don't feel able to express how sad, depressed or negative I feel when writing in the forum	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel there is not enough space for humour/self-irony and lightheartedness in the forum	<input type="radio"/>				
I find it very easy to discuss my personal feelings and private details of my life in the forum	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel uncomfortable sharing stories and negative emotions when many others in the forum seem to be 'worse off'	<input type="radio"/>				
There is someone in the forum to listen to me when I am upset	<input type="radio"/>				

**How is the forum helpful?**

**22. Please continue reflecting on statements as you did on the previous page. Tell me how accurately the following statements reflect your experience of the forum. For each row, choose one of the alternatives: almost never true, rarely true, occasionally true, often true, almost always true**

	almost never true	rarely true	occasionally true	often true	almost always true
Forum members are genuinely concerned about my problems	<input type="radio"/>				
People listen to me and what I write and answer on the basis of that	<input type="radio"/>				
Moderator's responses are informative and supportive	<input type="radio"/>				
The forum makes me feel better about myself	<input type="radio"/>				
The forum provides me with strength to actively deal with problems I am having	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel pressured to follow advice from members	<input type="radio"/>				
I have a strong sense of belonging to this forum	<input type="radio"/>				

### general support

**\*23. Has the forum addressed different aspects of support or discussed issues you have not talked about with other people, including friends, family and support services?**

No

Yes, please tell me what these are

**24. How would you compare the support in the forum with other support you have experienced?**

### General Support

**\*25. Which are the most important roles of the moderator for your overall benefit from the forum?**

**\*26. Is there anything the moderator should do more or less of?**

- No
- Yes, please tell me what

### General support

**27. Is there anything about visiting the forum that have made you anxious or uncomfortable?**

- No
- Yes, please tell me what made you anxious/uncomfortable

**28. Have there been situations/days when you have felt excluded from the forum?**

- No
- Yes, please tell me a bit about why you felt excluded

**29. Are you comfortable with the anonymity?**

- Yes
- Not always. Please tell my why you are not always comfortable with the anonymity

### Making sense of domestic violence

**\*30. Has reading and writing in the forum been useful in helping you to make sense of abuse?**

Rate how useful reading/writing has been to make sense of abuse

not useful at all      little useful      useful      very useful

                

If you found the forum useful to make sense of abuse, please tell me how?

**\*31. Has reading and writing in the forum influenced your understanding of what domestic violence is?**

Rate the extent to which your understanding of domestic violence been influenced.

Not at all      to a little extent      to some extent      to a great extent

                

If it has influenced your understanding of DV, please tell me how?

**Making sense of violence**

**\*32. Are you able to express all your thoughts and feelings about domestic violence without fear of being judged in the forum?**

Rate the extent of your ability to express thoughts/ideas in the forum without feeling judged

Not at all      To little extent      To some extent      To a great extent

                

Please give me some examples of thoughts/feelings you would hesitate to post in the forum

**\*33. Has being in the forum provided you with insights about something in particular in regard to domestic violence?**

- No
- yes, please tell me something you learned through the forum

**\*34. Which of the following best described your situation when you first came to the forum?**

- experiencing abuse
- was in the process of ending an abusive relationship
- had just ended an abusive relationship
- was dealing with consequences of abuse that ended 6 months or more before I joined the forum
- had never experienced abuse
- Something else, please tell me

### Taking Action

**\*35. Have you ever felt pressure from other members in the forum to end your relationship?**

- No
- Yes (please tell me why you felt pressured)

### Taking action

The next section will ask about the process of ending abuse and the support you may have received from the forum to do

this.

**\*36. The next questions will ask about how useful the forum has been to find information on Domestic Violence and Domestic Violence support services. Please tell me how useful the forum has been for each of these aspects. For each row choose one of the alternatives: Never useful, occasionally useful, often useful, almost always useful, not applicable**

	Never useful	Occasionally useful	Often useful	Almost always useful	Not applicable
To find information on Domestic Violence support services?	<input type="radio"/>				
To solve practical issues such as finding a new home, changing your phone number, setting up your own bank account or dealing with your partner's debts?	<input type="radio"/>				
To find information on legal rights, for example in relation to criminal charge or, child custody?	<input type="radio"/>				

### Taking action

**37. Has reading and writing in the forum influenced your decision-making when dealing with violence? Examples of such decisions could be to call the police, to contact domestic violence support services, to contact a friend, or something else.**

	to no extent at all	to a little extent	to some extent	To a great extent	Not applicable
Rate your forum-activities' influence on your decision-making	<input type="radio"/>				

Please give an example of a decision you believe was influenced by reading/writing in the forum

### Taking action

**\*38. Which of the following best describes your situation now?**

- experiencing abuse
- in the process of ending abuse
- dealing with consequences of abuse that ended whilst using the forum
- dealing with consequences of abuse that ended before I joined the forum
- something else, please tell me

**\*39. To what extent did reading and writing in the forum influence the decision to end abuse?**

not at all                      to little extent                      to some extent                      to a great extent

choose one option                                                                                       

If reading/writing did influence your decision to end abuse, please tell me how

**Moving on**

Many women find life after abuse challenging. The next questions ask about how the forum may have helped you cope with this transition.

**\*40. How many months/years ago did the abuse end? Choose the category that is most correct:**

- six months or less
- around a year ago
- 1-2 years ago
- 3-4 years ago
- more than 4 years ago

**\*41. Has reading and writing in the forum helped you to deal with long-term mental or physical consequences of violence such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem?**

Not at all                      Little                      To some extent                      Very much                      Not applicable

choose one alternative                                                                                                             

If you found it helpful, how did it help and with what?

**\*42. Has the forum been useful for finding/accessing support services that help you deal with the consequences of violence?**

Not at all      Little      To some extent      Very much      Not applicable

choose one alternative                             

Yes, please tell me what support services you looked for/access?

### Moving on

**\*43. Has reading and writing in the forum helped you to 'move on' with your life after the abuse?**

Not at all      little      to some extent      Very much

Choose one alternative                       

If it was useful in moving on please tell me how

**\*44. Has reading and writing in the forum prevented you from, or slowed down the process of 'moving on'?**

Not at all      little      to some extent      Very much

choose one alternative                       

If it prevented/slowed down the process of moving on please tell me how

### Almost done now, please carry on...

**\*45. Have you ever felt judged for a choice you made or something you wrote about in the forum?**

- No
- Yes, please tell me something about the issue and why you felt judged

**\*46. How would you rate the general level of accuracy of information in the forum?**

Very Low                      Low                      Medium                      High                      Very High

Tick one alternative                                                                                             

**\*47. What do you value the most with this forum?**

**\*48. What do you value the least with this forum?**

**Part 4. Could the forum be improved?**

**\*49. Is there anything you would suggest to improve the forum?**

- No
- Yes, please tell me what you would change and why

**\*50. Would you like discussions on specific topics which could be hosted by someone?**

- No
- Yes, please tell what topics you would like to discuss?

**Part 5. Optional additional questions**

This section is for those who have time to tell me a little more about your engagement with the forum. This is very useful for me to get a better understanding of what the forum means to you. You can also choose to respond to one/two of the questions that interest you the most, or go to the next section.

**51. Many abusers try to control how often you visit friends or relatives, how you dress, where you go. Has your forum activity helped you gain more control over your life? If it has can you give me an example**

**52. I am interested in knowing about a time in which you felt particularly supported. You can give an example of the most supportive thing someone said or offered. Please tell me what felt supportive and why.**

**53. How does it make you feel to be in the forum? Try to think of how you can feel after having spent some time in the forum**

#### Part 6. Summing up

**\*54. Has the forum had any positive or negative influences on you which have not been covered in the survey?**

- No
- I don't know
- yes, please tell me what they are

**\*55. Are there any other issues about the forum which were not covered in the questions but are important to you?**

No

Yes, please tell me a little more

### Thank you

Thank you very much for participating in this study!

A summary of the results will be made available on Women's Aid's website to everyone who participated. If you would like a copy being personally send to you please email me on [Kab0623@my.londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:Kab0623@my.londonmet.ac.uk), and I will send it to your email address at the end of this project.

## **Appendix 3: Interview Guide with the Manager and the Moderator**

### 1. Backgrounds information

- a) Could you briefly describe your work with the forum?
- b) Which are the main challenges?
- c) Approximately, how many people are working with the forum?
- d) Approximately how many members does the forum have?
- e) How often do new members sign up? (daily/weekly/monthly)
- f) Do you know, or suspect that any of the members have multiple accounts

### 2. History and Development

- a) What lead up to (the) decision to create this forum?
- b) What were you hoping it would fulfill for DV survivors?
- c) How was the forum developed?
- d) Where did you get ideas for how to structure the forum/the message-board/the archive?
- e) How did you develop rules, regulations and policies for communication?
- f) Would you say that the forum was used the way you intended it to be used?
- g) Did something surprise you about how members made use of the space?
- h) Has the way people interact changed over time? If yes how? For example, style of writing, content of the posts, the way members give each other support

### 3. Feedback from the survey

- a) Was it anything about the survey report that surprised you?

### 4. Possible issues

- a) Do you know of any reasons for why some people have left?
- b) Can you think of any situations when the support on the forum would be less helpful, or even a negative influence to end violence and to move on?
- c) do you think you need to have particular social skills to be accepted and to receive good support?
- d) Are there any members who tend to become a bit excluded or forgotten?
- e) Are there ever any tensions between members?
- f) What may disagreements or conflicts between members be about? Please give an example if you can think of any.
- g) do you interfere? What happens?

### 5. Long-term users

- a) A few members who are active on the forum have been there almost since the start. What role do you think these members have played for the forum as a whole and for new members?
- b) Is it safe to say that these members have influenced the way people write and respond in the forum? If so, in what way?
- c) Have you recruited any moderators amongst the people in the forum?

### 6. The work of the moderators

- a) Could you describe the moderators' work on the site?
- b) On the basis of all aspects of the moderators work, also work she does "behind the scene", what would you say are the moderators' most important roles?
- c) What do you think are the main challenges for the moderators?
- d) Sometimes there seems to be confusion about what counts as being on-topic. How do you draw the line between what is DV relevant and not DV relevant?
- e) Is there anything in regard to the moderators work, or regulations that may raise tensions?

### 7. The forum-perspective on violence.

- a) How would you summarise your own working definition/perspective of violence?
- b) Is it important for the aim of the forum that this perspective of violence is the one which dominates in the forum?
- c) In which ways can the moderator and Women's Aid influence members' way of looking at violence?
- d) Lundy Bancroft's 'why does he do that' is a popular reference. Did woman's aid introduce this book to the forum?
- e) Why do you think it is so popular?
- f) Do you think this book has a special meaning for the forum as a community?
- g) Would you say that the book supports woman's aid's perspective of violence?

### 8. A task from a few preliminary themes were found in the first analysis.

I would like you to rank the following themes below with 1 as most important and 6 as least important. Add any theme that you think is missing or may be an important sub-theme to the 5 themes below. Whilst you do this or when you have finished could you explain why you have chosen a particular order and describe possible new themes.

- a). To define and explain violence and have your own experience of violence validated by others. In addition, to understand one's own reactions to violence: both when leaving an abusive relationship and in the live after.

- b). Emotional support/work, i.e. dealing with feelings of guilt, anger, sadness, fears, and receive encouragement to move on.
- c). building limits for what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior by their partners.
- d). Information seeking/receiving about services, police, court, counseling, court, and everything else that is related to ending violence safety and dealing with the aftermath.
- e). Problem solving in the immediate situation. For example: to manage a particular situation with a violent partner: court procedure; or when being in the process of ending violence.
- f). Friendship/companionship with people who are in a similar situation - have someone on your side.
- g). Something else

#### 9. Recommendations

- a) If you would give advice to someone who would set up an online forum for domestic violence survivors, what would that be?

#### 10. final question

- a) Is there anything else that you think is important or relevant about the forum that I haven't asked about?