

## **Separating From Violent Male Partners: A Resistant Act in the Midst of Power Relations.**

By Vivienne Elizabeth<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Women who seek love and survival for our families and ourselves are treated as if our only choices are to 'stay' or 'leave'. 'Staying' is a socially suspect choice — often perceived as acceptance of violence — though 'leaving' is often unsafe (Mahoney 1994: 60)

'Why doesn't she leave?' has become the almost automatic response in contemporary Western cultures to revelations of male partner abuse.<sup>2</sup> Its recitation invites an explanation of a phenomenon — her failure to leave — that many find inexplicable. Through this question, the issue of leaving is defined as a key problem, perhaps even the central problem, of male partner violence. Yet, not only does this question suggest that women are responsible for ending the abuse, it also implies that leaving is the definitive solution to his violence (For examples of counter-arguments see Mahoney 1991, 1994; Kirkwood 1993).

While not wishing to legitimate this reaction, I want to make leaving or, as I prefer, separation my central focus.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, I seek to counter a widespread tendency to explain women's decisions about separation from abusive male partners in terms of their personal inadequacies or pathologies. As such, I argue for a shift in viewpoint away from the realm of the individual to the realm of the social. My interest in relocating women's decisions within a social field emerged during many hours of conversation, both with women who had past experiences of violent relationships and with a variety of people who have worked with these women, over a three year period whilst in the employ of a health promotion organization in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> These conversations indicated that, although differences in legal protections, policing practices, child custody proceedings, and social welfare and housing policies etcetera establish a need for locally based research, the dominant cultural norms and assumptions through and against which New Zealand women (particularly Pakeha<sup>5</sup> women) must negotiate their relationships with violent male partners are similar to those encountered by women (especially White women) living in other English-speaking western countries.

Some writers in the field have sought to make the social dimensions of women's responses to male partner violence apparent through an examination of women's stay/leave decisions (Brown 1997; Choice & Lamke 1997), while others have documented the obstacles women confront once they have separated (Hoff 1990; Kirkwood 1993). Still others have critically engaged with how we understand separation and its aftermath (Kelly et al., 1996; Mahoney, 1991, 1994). With the exception of the latter work, much of it is descriptive or uses explanatory models that, in failing to analyze the many and varied interactions associated with separation from the perspective of power, are unable to consider how such interactions impact on how

power is exercised between violent men and their partners. Given the centrality of power and control to feminist definitions of abuse this failure is somewhat perplexing.

In contrast, I suggest an orientation to the question of separation that embeds it within a Foucauldian framework of power relations. As will become clear in the following section, Foucauldian theory offers a conceptual 'toolkit' that has much to recommend itself for the purposes just outlined. In particular, Foucault's work emphasizes the ubiquitous nature of power relations (Foucault 1978 [1990]; Jones & Guy 1992; Sawicki 1991). Hence Foucauldian theory, like second-wave feminism, encourages us to recognize a wide range of interpersonal encounters as constituted through power (see Elizabeth 1992; Kondo 1990). Yet in an important departure, exercises of power within Foucauldian theory are understood to be contingent and therefore inherently unstable. Given the focus of this paper, this latter point is highly significant in that it suggests the possibility of contesting and disrupting the way power relations have been formulated within a given site; for example, the home.

As a result of this turn to Foucauldian theory, I have been able to bring together two strands of inquiry – the personal and the social – that tend to be treated as discrete entities. The framework that I am proposing insists on the importance of paying attention to the social context within which women operate (see also Mahoney 1994; Choice & Lamke 1997). In addition, this framework has the advantage of incorporating a concept of agency that argues for its dual character: in simple terms, that as socially located beings individuals are simultaneously actors and acted upon, determined and determining (Butler 1990, 1992; Hekman 1990, 1991; Davies 1991).

My purpose, in establishing this analytical approach, is to offer alternative ways of comprehending what is happening at this juncture of an abused woman's life. Throughout, I consistently raise questions that interrogate some of the commonly held assumptions about the process of separation. In this, I have followed the lead of people like Mahoney (1991, 1994) and Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996), but I build on their work by foregrounding the importance of a number of other social relationships in a abused woman's network, relationships that Foucault reminds us are simultaneously power relationships. Configured through power, the relationships that make up her social network can, like her relationship to her partner, become vehicles for the exercise of power over her. Thus the character of these social relationships has a direct and indirect bearing on the process of reconstructing both her personhood and her relationship to her partner post-separation.

With these objectives in mind, the next section contains an introduction to some of the core theoretical concepts that underpin my discussion. Specifically, I explore Foucauldian notions of discourse, power, subjectivity and resistance. Although outlined in brief, this introduction should permit those who are unfamiliar with this body of thought to track my argument. I move in the following section to definitions of abuse and violence. My attention then shifts to separation as I contemplate its use as a strategy of resistance to abuse by male partners. I suggest that the complexities of separation are submerged by the common usage of the stay/leave construct. While some authors have developed a staged approach to leaving (for example, Landenburger 1998; Kelly 1995), emphasizing that leaving should be seen as a process rather than a one off event (Ulrich 1998), they nevertheless present us with a narrative sequence that

inscribes leaving as the appropriate ending of an abused woman's story (see also Goetting [1999] 2000; Lawless 2001). In so doing, the exploration of other possible avenues for achieving violent free lives is foreclosed. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to address these other avenues of change.

In a continuation of my claim that separation is used as a strategy of resistance, I argue in the final sections that, in the aftermath of having separated from an abusive male partner, questions of identity and needs emerge as significant sites of struggle. While a woman's ex-partner typically remains a significant player in such struggles, family members, friends and professionals are just as likely to be key agents. I argue that these sites of struggle need to become the object of scrutiny if we are to come to a better understanding of how separation, as a potentially transformative act, can be used with success.

### **Getting Orientated To Theory**

The starting point for the theoretical framework that underpins this paper is poststructuralist feminism, especially its Foucauldian variant. Foucauldian feminism, along with other strands of poststructuralist theory, offers new ways of thinking about language, power, subjectivity<sup>6</sup>, and resistance. As such poststructuralism, offers a repertoire of theoretical tools that can be deployed with, what I believe to be, great benefits for the work at hand. A poststructuralist perspective on discourse, subjectivity, power and resistance is set out below in necessarily skeletal form.

According to Foucauldian feminism, language is organized in the form of competing discourses. Discourses are defined as meaning constituting systems, both verbal and visual, that systematically 'form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972:49; see also Weedon 1987; Scott 1988; Valverde 1991; Fraser 1992). In forming objects - be it individual subjects, social relations, or practices - discourses operate to structure the social worlds we inhabit (Foucault 1980; Weedon 1987; Gavey 1989).

Discourses that compete to structure similar aspects of our social worlds - for example, family relationships or child-rearing practices - are located within discursive fields. Competing discourses contain alternative subjectivities and/or alternative relationships between the same subjectivities. For example, the field of marital relations encompasses a modern discourse that establishes egalitarian relationships, a conventional discourse that produces hierarchical relations between husbands and wives, and a pathological discourse of violence that constructs extreme asymmetries of power between partners.

Within any discursive field, one discourse is likely to be dominant or hegemonic. Not only do hegemonic discourses generally appear commonsensical, normal or natural, they are also given expression within social institutions and practices (Weedon 1987; Gavey and McPhillips 1999). In spite of its hegemonic status, the power of a discourse to order social relationships is not inevitable (Weedon 1987; Fraser 1992). Discourses that govern the constitution of identities and relationships within a particular social context are always susceptible to being overturned and replaced by another discourse, producing new subjectivities and /or a new relational order between subjectivities in the process.

One of the key objects constituted through discourse is that of the subject (Henriques et al 1984; Weedon 1987). Within Foucauldian theory, a subject is someone who is simultaneously enabled and constricted. Not only does our constitution as a certain kind of subject delimit the kinds of actions we can take, it also enables us to carry out these actions (Foucault 1980, 1982; Weedon 1987; Davies 1991, 1992). Furthermore, to become a subject means that our understandings of ourselves and our relationships, together with our emotions, conforms to the dictates of the particular discursive framework in which we are currently located.

The subject of Foucauldian feminism is understood to be inherently in flux, constantly open to reconstitution in response to shifts in context or changes to the power relations (Kondo 1990). Produced across a range of conflicting discourses, the subject is precarious, contradictory and complex (Weedon 1987; Kondo 1990; Valverde 1991; Fraser 1992). This view of the subject overcomes some of the dilemmas that characterize much of the literature in the domestic violence field. It concurs with Kelly et al's (1996) argument that 'survivor' and 'victim' are identities that can co-exist within the same individual at the same time. In other words, 'survivor' and 'victim' do not have to refer to two different stages of a woman's life as suggested by 'the recovery narrative', a commonly used descriptor of the process women undergo as they re-establish themselves outside of the nexus of a violent relationship.

Because every discourse offers a range of subjectivities variously structured in relation to each other, discourses operate as a major vehicle for the establishment and maintenance of power relations (Foucault 1980; Weedon 1987; Gavey 1989; Elizabeth 2000). Which discourse comes to govern a social setting is therefore politically significant. In fact, contests over discursive ascendancy, together with the power to enforce that discourse, form a major avenue of political struggle, both in everyday encounters and in social policy arenas (Fraser 1989; Kondo 1990; Yeatman 1990).

Bearing this point in mind the question then becomes, why do certain discourses (and the relations between subject positions they produce) gain dominance within a setting? Or to put it slightly differently, what resources – both discursive and non-discursive – can actors bring to bear in order achieve the installation of their preferred discursive framework?

In order to answer these questions I want to turn to Cooper's (1994, 1995) notion of the existence of four interlocking modes of power. These Cooper names as: ideologies, or hegemonic discourses; force, that is 'the subjugation of the will or the body of another by physical or psychological means that include coercion, threats and violence'; disciplinary practices of surveillance and control; and resources, for instance skills, time and/or wealth, that enable actors to 'create a material advantage' (Cooper 1995:21-22; see also 1994). While Cooper discusses each mode of power separately she is at pains to argue that they are entwined and that they operate synergistically (Cooper 1994, 1995).

The utilization of these modes of power enables what Kondo calls the 'disciplinary production of "selves"' (Kondo 1990: 29 & 43). That is, the enforcement of particular discursive productions of another, irrespective of the other's previous constitutions and preferences. At this point in the flow of my discussion it is necessary to entertain yet another question: Are different categories of people, for instance men and women,

similarly placed with respect to their ability to deploy these modes of power? Cooper's response to this question is to argue that access to these modes of power is reflective of existing social power relations and hence it is socially mediated (Cooper 1994, 1995). More specifically, Cooper argues (and I and many others agree) we continue to exist in a patriarchal<sup>7</sup> social context that advantages men 'enabling men to exercise power in ways not similarly open to women' (Cooper 1995:10). To this I might add, that exercises of power by men and women are differentially interpreted thereby reinforcing a gendered ability to operate as powerful agents.

As part of her argument Cooper goes on to provide an important proviso to this statement that is quoted below:

Some exercises of power involve dominating women, that is, using women specifically as a resource in the furtherance of men's own objectives. However, male dominance is wider than specific domination of women. It includes a gendered ability to exercise agency and achieve desired outcomes in ways not available to women, although women may not necessarily be subjugated or exploited in the process. While not all men choose to exploit this advantage – to exercise power – an individual's abstention does not make the advantage disappear. Neither men nor women can simply opt out of gender's organizing framework, although both can find ways of disrupting or transforming it. (Cooper 1995:10)

When applied to the context of heterosexual partnerships, these ideas suggest that men and women do not undertake their relational negotiations on a level playing field. Men enter into relationships in a favorable position (although many do not feel this way!). As a consequence, their discursive construction of their partnerships – the identities assumed and the relations of power between these identities – is likely to prevail. Furthermore, the privileged access men enjoy to the various modes of power outlined by Cooper (1994, 1995) means that any challenges their partners might make to the gendered order men seek to install will in all likelihood be surmounted.

Neither Cooper's statements, nor my own, should be taken to rule out the possibility of resistance (Cooper 1994, 1995; Elizabeth 1997, 2000). As Foucault (1980, 1982, [1978]1990) often argued, exercises of power are constantly met by acts of resistance. This does not mean that resistance is necessarily a consciously political act, or that it is necessarily successful (Gordon 1980; Henriques et al., 1984; Kondo 1990; Sawicki 1991; Elizabeth 1992; Faith 1994). Nevertheless, the capacity to engage in resistance is dependent upon the ability to gain access to the modes of power outlined above (Cooper 1995).

In particular, I want to foreground the importance of access to rival discourses for effective resistance because it is through discourse that the use of other modes of power becomes a purposeful activity with a greater chance of success (Cooper 1995; Gavey & McPhillips 1999). In order for resistant subjects to have access to rival discourses, such discourses need to be present within the, either past or present, social orbit of the individual (Henriques et al., 1984; Weedon 1987; Yeatman 1990; Valverde 1991; Elizabeth 1992; Elizabeth 2000; Fraser 1992;). Where situations of power continue to

be defined as 'normal' (as some women describe their partner's violence against them) or inevitable it indicates that alternative discourses, which would name the situation otherwise, have been small in number, difficult to access and/or of limited effect (Gavey & McPhillips 1999).

In this paper, I set the stage for an exploration of women's acts of resistance against abusive male partners. But, as many women's stories of dealing with violent partners attest, acts of resistance are not always effective in disrupting the exercise of power, or in preventing the installation of inequitable and asymmetrical power relations. Moreover, the consequences of any act of resistance cannot be accurately predicted in advance. Ascertaining the effectiveness of a particular strategy of resistance can only be done on a case-by-case basis. It is also important to pay heed to the associated costs of resistant acts such that they are abandoned in favor of strategies of accommodation and compliance. These statements point to the need to take a complex approach to the question of resistance and compliance. Dorinne Kondo summed this position up nicely when she said: '... apparent resistance is riven with ironies and contradictions, just as coping and consent may have unexpectedly subversive effects' (1990:224).

Resistance, or agency, within the poststructuralist framework that I am proposing here assumes a specific character. It is no longer defined in terms of an ability to act outside the social order. This more widely held understanding links meaningful choice with freedom from social constraint. However, in this article, agency is understood as active negotiation within shifting contexts of constraint (see Butler 1991, 1992; Davies 1991; Kondo 1990; Hekman 1991, 1992; Moore 1994; Elizabeth 1997;). The subject of this version of agency both acts, and is acted upon; she both exercises power and is subject to exercises of power.

This view of agency encourages a more complex reading of women's experiences of male partner abuse. Typically agency and victimization are juxtaposed such that 'agency is exercised by a self-determining individual, one who is not victimized by others' (Mahoney 1994:60). Defined oppositionally, the absence of agency becomes a marker of one's status as a victim. As Mahoney argues, this approach to the question of agency dichotomizes women's experiences of male partner violence in problematic ways (Mahoney 1994; see also Kelly et al 1996). To develop a fuller exploration of the meaning of agency in the lives of battered women requires rejecting the all-victim approach and the all-agency stance, a position that is advanced here (see also Mahoney 1994).

### **Concepts and Terminology**

As Linda Gordon's highly informative history of the help-seeking efforts of poor abused women living in New York State makes clear, the boundary between 'acceptable and unacceptable attempts to coerce' (1988:291) has been the subject of historical, and I might add cultural, fluctuations. Gordon states:

Unlimited family violence was never tolerated, and there were always standards as to what counted as excessive violence. (Gordon 1988: 256)

In other words, it is not that a boundary has not existed, but its exact location along a continuum of coercive behaviours has been dependent on the discourses available within the social and historical context within which these acts gain their meaning.<sup>8</sup> Historical shifts are, according to Gordon (1988), largely attributable to the emergence and success of feminist discourses on heterosexuality, power and violence. Feminism, with its attack on male dominance, has been a prime force in the discursive constitution of acts of violence, intimidation and other forms of control within heterosexual relationships as abusive, and hence illegitimate.

Despite the influence of feminist discourses within this arena, a consensus around where the line between 'normal' and 'abusive' relationships should be drawn, or even how abuse should be defined, does not exist (see Gelles & Loseke 1993). In fact, the level of conflict over these issues is indicative of the political character of this arena. This politicization has prompted both a proliferation of terms and definitions, and a critical focus on the language in use. For instance, writers within the field are at odds over whether the appropriate descriptor should be 'family' or 'domestic', and engage in debates over the inclusiveness of 'violence' in contrast to 'abuse'.

Bearing these debates in mind, I have settled on the use of 'male partner violence' interchanged with 'male partner abuse'. My preference for these phrases lies with their clear indication of the agent of the violence and abuse. As such they indicate my adoption of a gendered analysis within this arena. While some writers (e.g., Lapsley 1993; Mullender 1996) have expressed reservations about the use of 'violence' because of the propensity to discursively construct this in physical terms alone, I, nevertheless, favor its retention. The advantage of 'violence' is that it clearly conveys that force – whether this is physical, sexual, economic or psychological - is being used to both violate and harm another. On the other hand, I intend my usage of 'abuse' to prompt readers to adopt a broad outlook, one that conceives of abuse as a situation in which 'a person is taken advantage of [by another], but may not be physically coerced or harmed, and may even cooperate...' (Lapsley 1993:5).

Questions of terminology aside, what do we actually mean when we describe a relationship as violent and abusive? Although numerous definitions of 'abuse' are on offer within feminist circles, such definitions are set apart from others within the field through their insistence on the relevance of gender and on locating acts of violence - whether these are physical, psychological, sexual, and/or economic - within the context of ongoing attempts to establish and confirm gender power relations (Mahoney 1991, 1994; Stark & Flitcraft 1996). For instance, a New Zealand writer, Kay Douglas, offers this definition:

An abusive relationship is characterized by inequality. When one partner consistently controls, dominates or intimidates the other by means of manipulative, punishing or forceful behavior, abuse is occurring. (Douglas 1994: 24)

The advantage of this definition is that it suggests that the significance of a range of behaviors lies in their use to consistently exercise power over another. It is the effect of

these behaviors, their meaning if you like, and not simply their enactment, that produce them as abusive. The distinction between 'actions' and their 'effects' (or meaning) is an important one to bear in mind, particularly with respect to debates over whether or not men are abused by female partners at rates approaching male partner abuse. As others have noted, one of the major effects of having been subjected to abuse is the feeling of fear (Lapsley 1993). The presence, or absence, of fear might therefore be used to differentiate 'mutual fighting' from 'battering'.

Although the definition offered by Douglas has merit, I, nevertheless, want to propose an alternative that explicitly draws on the assumptions about power outlined in the previous section. Hence, I suggest that we think of an abusive relationship as one in which the contest for power is consistently and repetitively settled in favor of the male partner through his deployment of a variety of technologies of power and violence, which might include physical assaults, verbal insults, psychological control, sexual attacks and/or withholding financial resources. As a consequence, women over whom this power is exercised experience themselves, at least within the context of that particular relationship, as being increasingly controlled, together with the attendant emotional states that these positionings produce such as fear, despair, shame and anger. The construction of extremes of power occurs despite most women's attempts to resist his exercises of power. Conceptualizing abusive relationships in this way fosters the recognition that the struggle for how power relations are constituted is ongoing and hence open to change, whilst also acknowledging the extent to which power relations can cohere into comparatively immutable forms.

### **Separation, power and resistance**

Exercising power over another is inevitably about an attempt to control, or determine, what another can be and do. It entails a restriction of the other's options, delimiting access to subjectivities and the actions enabled by these subjectivities. For instance, women who are abused by their male partners are frequently denied access to the position of the autonomous woman. Barred from self-determination, abused women seldom act on the basis of their own preferences, operating instead with an eye looking over their shoulder towards their partner's requirements and desires (Townes & Adams 1997). In other words, abused women become self-policing subjects (Foucault [1975] 1979; 1980).

Yet, as I argued in an earlier section of this paper, exercises of power do not rule out acts of resistance. In this instance, I am concerned with women's acts of resistance against abusive male partners, in particular their use of separation.<sup>9</sup> Access to the strategy of leaving is, however, socially and culturally mediated. The convergence of multiple discourses on women and men in heterosexual relationship operates to produce a gendered pattern of attachment to relationships (Duncombe & Marsden 1993, 1995; Elizabeth 1997) According to Duncombe and Marsden this leads to a greater unwillingness on behalf of women to abandon their relationships (Duncombe & Marsden 1993, 1995; Elizabeth 1997; Okin 1989). In the light of these statements, it seems important to identify how access to this strategy is variously constrained for women of different cultures. Such constraints are formative elements in the production of women - abused as well as non-abused - as committed to their intimate relationships

(Elizabeth 1997 & 1997b; Mahoney 1994). They also indicate sites for political action towards social change.

Contemplating the place of separation within an abused women's life story raises a number of questions, not the least of which is what prompts women to separate from abusive partners (see Kirkwood 1993; Goetting [1999] 2000). Goetting ([1999] 2000:12-13) suggests that women are motivated by a number of different catalysts including: an escalation in the severity of his violence; violence directed towards their children; an increased capacity to be financially independent; a renaming of the situation as violent, unacceptable and unlikely to change; and so on.

Irrespective of the exact circumstances under which women separate, it is important to recognize it as an attempt to effect a long-term transformation of the extreme asymmetries in power relations to which abused women are subjected. While separation as an act of resistance aims at transformation, there are several ways in which separation might be deployed in the achievement of that aim. Deployed as a threat, separation can be used in the context of an ongoing relationship as a lever to bring about change. Alternatively, separation can be used in an attempt to simultaneously terminate the relationship and the abuse.

Generally, the determination of the manner in which leaving is being used can only be ascertained in retrospect. The decision to separate from an abusive partner often needs to be made repeatedly during the period of initial separation, and possibly for years to come. Yet, within dominant narrative conventions, returning to a relationship converts separation into 'staying', resulting in the disappearance from the official record of a key act of resistance to his power. Informed by women's accounts, we might like to think in terms of the plural - separations - punctuated by (often temporary) reconciliations. In effect, this suggests that the line that distinguishes 'being in' a relationship from 'being out' of one is not clearly demarcated. In fact, this line may be highly blurred and subject to re-designation.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore important to consider the variety of ways in which the end may be marked (for example, through emotional distancing, physical separation, and cessation of all forms of communication) and thus the possibility of multiple and shifting endings.

This perspective fosters the recognition of the end of a relationship as a (potential) site of contest. As many others working in this field have noted, separation and the subsequent termination of a relationship are often the site of ongoing struggles between women and abusive male partners. In many instances, abusive male partners insist on the continuation of the relationship, thus doing violence to a woman's preference for the relationship to end. This should come as no surprise. After all, the absence of respect for her choices and preferences is one of the hallmarks of abuse (Elizabeth 1997b).

Martha Mahoney (1991) offers the term 'separation assault' to refer to the struggle for control that ensues both at the time, and after, a woman decides to separate from a partner who is abusive:

Separation assault is the attack on the women's body and volition in which her partner seeks to prevent her from leaving, retaliate for the separation, or force her to return. It aims at overbearing her will as to where and with whom she will live, and coercing her in order to enforce connection in a

relationship. It is an attempt to gain, retain or regain power in a relationship, or to punish the woman for ending the relationship. (Mahoney 1991: 65-6)

Mahoney argues for the use of 'separation assault' over post-separation abuse because the latter term fails to recognise the fact that the violence occurs in response to the decision to leave rather than the act of leaving itself (Mahoney 1991).

Separation assault may entail the escalation or a diversification of the ways in which he abuses her. 'Separation attacks' are often located in previously untapped arenas, and may involve other people as key players who become agents of her ongoing abuse and victimization. As Mahoney (1991) discusses, issues of child custody and access frequently form new sites for exercises of power. It is commonplace for men to threaten their partners with custody suits pre and post-separation. Such tactics are indicative of the use of the courts as an extension of the ways in which abusive men exercise control over their ex-partners. 'Batterers use the legal system as a new arena of combat when they seek to keep their wives from leaving' (Mahoney 1991:44). Citing work by Lenore Walker and Glenace Edwall, Mahoney notes that at least 50% of all contested custody cases involved families with a history of some form of domestic violence, and in approximately 40% of these cases, fathers were awarded the custody of their children irrespective of their history of violence (Mahoney 1991).

Clearly then, the struggle between a woman and her abusive partner over the ending of their relationship is a source of major concern. But this concern should not blind social researchers and practitioners from considering the part that other people play in this struggle. As workers in the field, it behooves us to ask a number of questions. In what other settings – for instance social welfare offices, the courts, and interactions with the Police - does the status of the relationship become an issue? Is the designation of the status of the relationship provided by an abused woman recognized by other key figures in her social landscape – her parents, her social worker, the family court judge and so on? If not, whose definition of the status of the relationship prevails? What might this tell us about who is exercising power within that context? How does settling on a particular definition of the end of a relationship - usually cessation of cohabitation - impact on her ability to meet her needs and the needs of her children? What effect does this have on her abilities to effectively use separation to renegotiate her relationship with her (abusive) partner?

For instance, in New Zealand the availability of legal aid money to deal with custody and access issues, obtain protection orders and so on, is typically dependent on income level. However, unless women have ceased to reside with their former partners, their income level is determined on a joint basis rather than on an individual basis. As a consequence, a woman who wants to manage threats (made by her partner) over the loss of her children post-separation by obtaining custody orders prior to a physical separation is placed in a highly invidious situation. Does she abandon her quest for custody and stay? Does she leave taking the children with her and risk censure from the Family Court? Or does she continue to pursue custody, knowing that she may not be able to afford legal representation, while her former partner is in all probability well placed to pay for his legal bills?

Similarly, in order to obtain the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB)<sup>11</sup> separating women must satisfy an officer at *Work and Income*<sup>12</sup> of the legitimacy of their need for financial support. Such encounters are frequently characterized by contests over the timing and permanence of a woman's separation; contests over when benefit payments will begin thereby directly impacting on her ability to acquire food; and contests over the size of the housing supplement she will receive thus affecting the location and standard of accommodation she can obtain. Separating women and *Work and Income* staff are not equally placed with respect to these contests. The interpretations arrived at by a *Work and Income* officer will almost inevitably prevail over a woman's and are unlikely to be overturned, except through the interventions of other powers, for example by staff from Women's Refuge and other community agencies.

As both of these examples highlight, interactions between a separating woman and representatives of helping agencies need to be treated as interactions through which power is potentially wielded over her. As 'petitioning subjects' women are vulnerable to having their definition of their needs supplanted by institutionalized definitions. As Fraser (1989) eloquently argues, defining the contents and legitimate scope of a person's needs is a political act: it is neither neutral nor non-contentious. In the case of women separating from violent partners, a failure to recognize the legitimacy of her needs claims will, as a matter of course, result in a failure to meet those needs. Settings in which this process occurs are, as Fraser (1989) reminds us, characterized by hierarchical power relationships. When helping encounters become structured in this manner, they assume a terrifying resemblance to the very kinds of controlling relationships abused women have been seeking to leave behind.

Contests over her discursive locations are not confined to the public arena, however. Family members, friends and other associates may also engage abused women in struggles over relational identity and status. While some family members and friends might react enthusiastically to her assumption of the identity of 'separated woman', others may well engage in avid and vocal criticism (see Hoff 1990). Many New Zealanders (of all ethnicities) continue to regard marriage as a partnership that should be maintained at least until 'the children have grown up'. The pre-eminence of this discursive construction of marriage is in many instances not diminished by knowledge of his violence. It is still not uncommon for revelations of male violence towards her to be met with statements like, 'What did you do to provoke him?' followed by recommendations that she change her behavior in order to prevent further abuse! Invoking discourses about the needs of children for active fathering, the embarrassment and shame that will follow separation, and the acceptable nature of a 'few hits and insults', many members of a woman's social network privilege the maintenance of the relationship over and above freedom from violence for her and her children.

In raising objections to the dissolution of her relationship, family and friends seek to overturn her positioning 'outside of marriage' in order to maintain her location 'within marriage' (or 'within partnership'). Interventions of this sort serve as an exemplar of the 'disciplinary production of selves': the exercise of power in order to enforce a particular discursive construction of the self (Kondo 1990: 29 & 43). Bearing such interventions in mind, we might like to broaden the scope of the term 'separation

assault' to include attacks committed by those members of an abused woman's network who oppose her reconstitution outside of the couple nexus.

Broadening the scope of 'separation assault' to encompass a wider range of agents encourages us to see abused women as embedded in a whole raft of social relationships. As stated above, these relationships operate as avenues for the exercise of power – both 'power to' and 'power over'. As such they play a pivotal role in establishing whether or not an abused woman can effectively use separation to both resist her partner's excesses of power and to reconstitute herself as an autonomous agent. In ascertaining the impact of these social relationships it is important to recognize that they form an interlinked web. Consequently, the outcome of transactions in one relational setting may well reverberate throughout the rest of an abused woman's relational network, including her relationship to her ex-partner. For example, when needs that are critical to her well-being and the well-being of her children are not met as a result of the decisions made by a *Work and Income* staff member returning to her former partner may become 'preferable'.

Although this example suggests that women's difficulties are compounded as a consequence of the interlinked nature of her social network, this is not always the case. Interlinkage may prompt the mobilization of extra resources, both economic and emotional, to offset the negative effects of discursive constitutions made elsewhere. To return to the example of *Work and Income*, family members and friends often supply food and other material possessions in an effort to counter the impact of the policies of *Work and Income* on a woman's well-being.

Irrespective of how such interlinkages play out in the lives of women who are separating from abusive partners, it is vital that these social agents are more centrally located in the analytical frameworks we establish around women's separation from violent men. While empirical analysis of how these social agents interact with abused women will no doubt prove highly valuable, researchers and practitioners can make an important contribution to the process of socializing separation by telling a different story, a story of multiple actors.

## **Conclusion**

By consistently engaging with both popular and academic discourses on separation from violent male partners, this article highlights the need for a more complex rendering of the issue of separation. Telling more complex stories about separation has been hindered by the dominance within this field of teleological discourses that inscribe permanent separation as the desired end-point. As a result of the bifurcation of women's responses to violence through such discourses, women's decisions to return to their partners become instances of 'staying'. And 'staying' is read, by women themselves and others, as a mark of their failure and weaknesses; alternatively it is taken as a sign of his 'total' power and her capitulation to that power.

While not wanting to under-estimate the multiple ways in which abusive men exercise power over their partners, especially during processes of separation, it is also important that spaces are created within our culturally available discourses of separation that permit the recognition of women who have been abused to act as agents.

Conceptualizing separation as an act of resistance marks a significant step in this direction.

One of the effects of discursively constructing separation as an act of resistance is that separation is no longer viewed as the solution to the problem of male partner violence and hence the end point to which her narrative ideally journeys. Instead, separation is located within a larger discourse of change and transformation where it is defined as tool that can be deployed with varying degrees of success. Once understood in this manner, returning to abusive partners may (in some instances) signify her power to make a positive difference. More importantly, because the success with which women can utilize separation as a tool of change is dependent upon the social context within which they are situated and operate it is necessary to critically examine that context.

In order to reflect critically on these social contexts, Foucauldian theories that point to the omnipresent nature of power within social life have much to offer. Although the emphasis on the ubiquitous nature of power relations within Foucauldian theory might seem pessimistic, I have argued in this article that recognizing power in this manner enables a centralization of other relationships in the cultural stories we tell of separation from abusive partners. The repercussions of constituting other people in a woman's social network as significant agents is that their actions are seen to matter: they too can be agents of constraint and entrapment or agents of empowerment and positive change.

Finally, at the level of social policy, my argument suggests that recent attacks on social welfare payments for single mothers, as has been the case in New Zealand and elsewhere, together with assertions by national leaders about the importance of parenting within a nuclear family setting, are likely to have a detrimental effect on those who are victims of male partner violence. These shifts in social climate not only raise the stakes of separating, but also make life after separation much less attractive: what if life after separating turns out to be rather closer to life prior to separating than had been anticipated? Clearly under these circumstances, the efficacy of separation as a tool of transformation is seriously eroded. When this occurs, the actors who contributed to the production of these circumstances need to be included within our analyses. The point of this article has been to highlight the importance of this analysis and to offer a theoretical framework within which this might occur.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Sociology, The University of Auckland, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. This article was written with the partial support of a grant from the Health Research Council of New Zealand. I would also like to thank the following people for their input into the development of this article: Jennifer Hand, Tim McCreanor, Carolyn Coggan, Colleen Ivory, Shona Selby, Marilyn Burton, Luisa Falanitule, Jo Elvidge, Shona Thompson, and Wendy Larner.

<sup>2</sup> Although it has reached the status of a given, the 'Why doesn't she leave?' question is in fact historically and culturally specific. For many women living in Westernized countries such as New Zealand leaving has been an option few could entertain prior to the arrival of fault-free divorce, the recognition of the

---

principal caregiver (typically mothers) as the primary custodian, the introduction of state benefits for single mothers, and the removal of discriminatory labor market laws. Such shifts and changes during the later part of the twentieth century have created a climate in which greater numbers of women are separating from husbands and establishing single-parent families. This does not mean, however, that socio-economic conditions no longer have an effect on the decisions that women make about their intimate partnerships or on what kind of standard of living they are able to provide for themselves and their children.

<sup>3</sup> Separation, in the context of a relationship marked by male partner abuse, may simply be one more instance of the exercise of power when utilized by ‘him’, or, when deployed by ‘her’, an attempt to resist and contest his exercise of power. Acknowledging the possibility that women who are abused not only leave, but are also left, forms the basis for my preference for ‘separation’ as a term. The use of ‘separation’ leaves the question of who was exercising agency at this juncture open for investigation. Given my purpose in this piece, I want to focus on ‘her’ use of separation in the following paragraphs, while not dismissing the very real needs and issues that arise for women who are ‘left’.

<sup>4</sup> My position at Public Health Promotion, Auckland Healthcare, New Zealand was funded through the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> Pakeha is the indigenous name for White people, typically of Anglo-Celtic heritage, living in New Zealand.

<sup>6</sup> Subjectivity refers to ‘the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relations to the world’ (Weedon 1987: 32).

<sup>7</sup> By patriarchy Cooper means ‘a specifically gendered organizing framework composed through a series of historically emergent articulations between gender and other social practices’ (Cooper 1995: 10).

<sup>8</sup> At any point in time, the assignment of this boundary will vary both within, and between, various social/cultural groupings. Furthermore, debates over where to set this boundary can become infused with other debates (for instance, claims to autonomy by minority groups) occurring within particular socio-cultural groupings. Taken up as a question of autonomy and sovereignty, attempts to address abuse within the community may be treated with hostility.

<sup>9</sup> Of course separation, in many instances, is also a matter of survival. In focusing on power, there is no intention to detract from life and death issues. For many women, it is at this point in time that unprecedented levels of violence are unleashed and she is most in danger of losing her life (see Goetting [1999] 2000; Lawless 2001).

<sup>10</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that in many instances, it is not possible to physically separate from a partner who is abusive. When physically separating from an abusive man is not possible what other

---

ways can women ‘leave’? Do they emotionally vacate the relationship? And how do they mark this emotional disconnection? Do they turn to alcohol and/or drugs (see Lempert 1994)?

<sup>11</sup> The DPB is the name given to New Zealand’s state funded financial support for single parents and others engaged in caring activities.

<sup>12</sup> *Work and Income* is the current name for New Zealand’s state funded income support agency.

### **Bibliography**

Brown, Jody. 1997. “Working toward freedom from violence: The process of change in battered women.” *Violence Against Women* 13: 5-26.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1992. “Contingent foundations: Feminism and the question of ‘postmodernism’” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler & Joan Wallace Scott, 3-21. New York: Routledge.

Choice, Pamela & Leanne K. Lamke. 1997. “A conceptual approach to understanding abused women’s stay/leave decisions.” *Journal of Family Issues* 18: 290-314.

Cooper, Davina. 1994. “Productive, relational and everywhere? Conceptualising power and resistance within foucauldian feminism.” *Sociology* 28: 435-454.

Cooper, Davina. 1995. *Power in Struggle. Feminism, Sexuality and the State*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Davies, Bronwyn. 1991. “The concept of agency: A feminist poststructuralist analysis.” *Social Analysis* 30: 42-53.

Davies, Bronwyn. 1992. “Women’s subjectivity and feminist stories” in *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, eds. Carolyn Ellis & Michael G. Flaherty, 53-76. Newbury Park: Sage.

Douglas, Kay. 1994. *Invisible Wounds: A Self-Help Guide for New Zealand Women in Destructive Relationships*. Auckland: Penguin.

Duncombe, Jean & Dennis Marsden. 1993. “Love and intimacy: The gender division of emotion and ‘emotion work’. A neglected aspect of

- sociological discussion of heterosexual relationships.” *Sociology* 27: 221-241.
- Duncombe, Jean & Dennis Marsden. 1995. “‘Workaholics’ and ‘whingeing women’: Theorising intimacy and emotion work — The last frontier of gender inequality?” *Sociological Review* 43: 150-169.
- Elizabeth, Vivienne. 1992. “Co-habitation as marriage Resistance? A feminist deconstruction.” *Sites: A Journal for Radical Perspectives on Culture* 24: 79-98.
- Elizabeth, Vivienne. 1997. *Something old. Something borrowed. Something new: Heterosexual Cohabitation as Marriage Resistance — A Feminist Deconstruction*. PhD Thesis. University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Elizabeth, Vivienne. 1997. “Beyond abuse: The power of leaving,” a paper presented to North Harbour Living Without Violence, Auckland, New Zealand, December.
- Elizabeth, Vivienne. 2000. “Cohabitation, marriage and the unruly consequences of difference.” *Gender & Society* 14: 87-110.
- Faith, Karlene. 1994. “Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and feminism” in *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice*, eds. H. Lorraine Radtke & Henderikus J. Stam, 36-66. London: Sage.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. [1978] 1990. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge*, trans. et al. Colin Gordon, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1982. “The subject and power,” trans. L. Sawyer, in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfuss and Paul Rabinow, 208-226. Brighton: Harvester Press.

- Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "The uses and abuses of French discourse theories for feminist politics." *Theory, Culture and Society* 9: 51-72.
- Gavey, Nicola. 1989. "Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis: Contributions to feminist psychology." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 13: 459-475.
- Gavey, Nicola and Kathryn McPhillips. 1999. "Subject to romance: Heterosexual passivity as an obstacle to women initiating condom use." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23: 349-367.
- Gelles, Richard J. and Donileen R. Loseke. eds. 1993. *Current Controversies on Family Violence*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Goetting, Ann with Caroline Jory. [1999] 2000. *Getting Out: Life Stories of Women Who Left Abusive Men*. London: Vision Paperbacks.
- Gordon, Colin. 1980. "Afterword" in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon, 229-259. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gordon, Linda. 1988. *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence In America*. New York: Viking.
- Hekman, Susan. 1990. *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Hekman, Susan. 1991. "Reconstituting the subject: Feminism, modernism, and postmodernism." *Hypatia* 6: 44-63.
- Henriques, Julian, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze Venn, & Valerie Walkerdine eds. 1984. *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London: Methuen.
- Hoff, Lee Ann. 1990. *Battered Women as Survivors*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, Alison and Camille Guy. 1992. "Radical feminism in New Zealand: From Piha to Newtown" in *Feminist Voices: Women's Studies Texts*

for *Aotearoa/New Zealand*, ed. Rosemary Du Plessis with Kathie Irwin, Alison Laurie and Sue Middleton, 300-316. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

Kelly, Liz, Shelly Burton and Linda Regan. 1996. "Beyond victim or survivor: Sexual violence, identity and feminist theory and practice" in *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality*, eds. Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant, 77-101. London: MacMillan.

Kelly, Liz. 1995. "Crisis intervention responses to domestic violence," a paper presented at St George's Conference October. Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, University of North London.

Kirkwood, Catherine. 1993. *Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom of Change*. London: Sage.

Kondo, Dorrine K. 1990. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Landenburger, Kären M. 1998. "Exploration of women's identity: Clinical approaches with abused women" in *Empowering Survivors of Abuse*, ed. Jacquelyn C. Campbell, 61-69. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lapsley, Hilary. 1993. *The Measurement of Family Violence: A Critical Review of the Literature*. Wellington, N.Z: Social Policy Agency.

Lawless, Elaine. 2001. *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative*. Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press.

Mahoney, Martha 1991 "Legal images of battered women: Redefining the issues of separation." *Michigan Law Review* 90: 1-94.

Mahoney, Martha. 1994. "Victimization or oppression? Women's lives, violence and agency" in *The Public Nature Of Private Violence*, eds. Martha Fineman & Roxanne Mykitiuk, 59-92. New York & London: Routledge.

Moore, Henrietta L. 1994. *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

- Mullender, Audrey. 1996. *Rethinking Domestic Violence: The Social Work and Probation Response*. London: Routledge.
- Okin, Susan Moller. 1989. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sawicki, Jana. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*. New York: Routledge.
- Stark, Evan & Flitcraft, Anne. 1996. *Women at Risk: Domestic Violence and Women's Health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Straus, Murray A. 1997. "Yes. Physical assaults by women partners: A major social problem" in *Women, Men And Gender: Ongoing Debates*, eds. Mary Roth Walsh, 210-221. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Towns, Alison and Peter Adams. 1997. "Doing dominance. Women's experience of men's violence" a paper presented to Domestic Violence Symposium, NZ Psychological Society, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Ulrich, Yvonne Campbell. 1998. "What helped most in leaving spouse abuse" in *Empowering Survivors of Abuse*, ed. Jacquelyn C. Campbell, 70-78. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Valverde, Marianna. 1991. "As if subjects existed: Analysing social discourses." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 28: 173-187.
- Watson, Sophie. 1995. "Reclaiming social policy" in *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, eds. Barbara Caine & Rosemary Pringle, 164-171. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Weedon, Chris. 1987. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Yeatman, Anna. 1990. *Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Femocrats: Essays on the Contemporary Australian State*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.