

## **Understanding the Performance: Learning Identity and Domestic Violence**

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**Abstract:** This interpretive ethnographic study examines the process of learning identity as it relates to domestic violence. An identity construct that includes a sense of self and a sense of social is described. Changes are traced in survivors' identities over time.

### **Introduction**

Research suggests inadequate understanding of domestic violence as a phenomenon created by and lived in everyday lives of the people in North American society (Horsman, 2000). Accompanying this ignorance (or denial) there is a shunning of responsibility by the general public for both the existence and abolition of domestic violence. These conditions enable domestic violence to continue largely unchallenged. "Challenge" here is the idea that domestic violence is a pervasive social flaw that we as a society appear to be unwilling and/or unable to identify and grapple with in any systematic way.

In this study, I explored relationships between individual (via narratives) and social (via discourses) as related to domestic violence. Doing this exploration in terms of identity emphasized that behaviors and beliefs conducive to the perpetuation of domestic violence are learned, and that domestic violence can be examined as a social construction created by and contributing to our identities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The primary theoretical construct used in the study is the notion of learning identity. It is a heuristic device intended to provide a way of thinking about the individual and the social as they relate to and affect each other. The construct is intended to be historical and contextualized, as well as dynamic for the purposes of learning and change. Several components of identity are identified in the following sections, as are their relationships to each other and to learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, identity is the contextualized interplay of a sense of self; sense of social; and struggle/ cooperation with other agencies. A first component is the sense of self, which is defined to be the process of a person's interpretation and reconstruction of her body and history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access (Alcoff, 1997; Butler 1999). It is not purely an internal phenomenon, being subject to external, contextual influences. Stereotypes are an example of a situation where a person's sense of self is subject to external forces. A second component is the sense of social, which exists when a person sees herself within the social, as the product of and a contributor to the social milieu (Hennessy, 1993). The connection between self and social is made through ideology, the various ways by which social constructions of what can be understood, spoken, thought, valued, etc. are produced (Foley, 1999; Hennessy, 1993).

According to Vygotsky (1978), sign systems (e.g. written and spoken language) are created by societies over the course of time, changing with the society as it develops. Internalization of culturally produced sign systems brings about behavioral changes and forms the bridge between early and later individual development. The mechanism of individual, developmental change is therefore rooted in society and culture. Vygotsky's "culturally produced sign systems" (1978) are equated with ideological discourses that mediate between the individual and the social, where learning is the descriptive term for internalization of discourses and subsequent changes in behavior. The entire process is understood as existing within a network

and structure of interest and power relationships (Cervero & Wilson, 2001).

Vygotsky states that signs are internally oriented rather than externally oriented like tools. He says sign use is a “means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself; the sign is *internally* oriented.” (1978, p. 55, italics in original). I would argue that the use of signs is also aimed at mastering others. Concepts like hegemony, domination by control of truth discourses, are based on the idea of sign use to master others. Signs are both internally *and* externally oriented. Learning starts as interpersonal operations (Vygotsky, 1978); all interactions between people are marked by power relations. Many learning and education theorists, like Vygotsky or Dewey, present learning in positive terms. Power is not always used in the interests of a learner, as is the case in battering situations. In essence, an abuser teaches his victim to be a battered woman.

In short, learning is seen as a change in relationship with self and social context; learning is how we figure out who we are, where we belong in the social order, and how we go about occupying that position.

### **Domestic Violence**

Literature on domestic violence is broad, diverse, and rife with conflict. The conflict is open and vigorous, giving rise to multiple books dedicated to discussion of the conflicts alone (e.g., Roleff, 2000). Since the use of literature to answer research questions emerged from and was targeted to specific sections of data, initial reviews sketched out a landscape of discourse to use for analysis. The review focused on main areas of interest for the study that included education, identity, recovery, feminist studies of domestic violence, and women’s studies. Lisa DeTora (2000) examined a wide variety of popular (e.g. media, popular music), academic, activist, and other cultural discourses on domestic violence. By virtue of her wide-ranging examination, she provided a valuable set of references that functioned well as a starting point when researching discourses that emerged from participant narratives.

For a working definition of domestic violence, I adopted and adapted this activist definition: “Battering is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence” (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV], <http://www.ncadv.org/problem/what.htm>). I extended that definition, however, by specifying control *to an end* – the abuser had a concrete goal (not necessarily articulated) that was achieved by establishing control. The goal, as understood in my work, was an abuser’s domination – usurpation – of a victim’s identity processes. The victim is marginalized in the processes to the greatest degree that the abuser can manage, using battering behaviors as described above. By isolating a victim and controlling interaction with others, an abuser reduces the potential for the victim to develop a functional sense of social. Verbal degradation tells a victim what she is and is not; physical and emotional attacks reduce her will and ability to resist domination. Constant reinforcement is necessary to retain control over another person’s identity processes, and even then it seems that control would rarely be absolute.

### **Study Method & Design**

Interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) guided the study methodologically. There were three participants in the study. The focus of this study was depth rather than breadth. In a study of this type, to achieve the desired depth of exposure to and understanding of the study participants, a significant level of trust is necessary. Participants were known to the researcher for several years prior to conducting the study. All are White and raised within US culture, though of different socioeconomic classes, religions, and ages. They were married to their abusers. Each has a Bachelor’s degree and some graduate-level education. Central research questions guiding the study were:

- ❖ What representations do women survivors offer of their domestic violence experiences?
- ❖ What is the process by which study participants reshaped identity as domestic violence survivors?
- ❖ How do the representations of participants relate to cultural discourses of domestic violence, as seen through a lens of learning identity?

The researcher conducted in-depth dialogic interviews with participants and collected available original writings (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Informal interviews, that is, chance meeting and casual conversation, were also a significant data source. Narratives were constructed for or with each participant from transcripts and original writings (Riessman, 1993). Each narrative was read against cultural discourses of domestic violence as laid out in the literature review. The identity framework provided a means to examine individual narratives and cultural discourses together. A final story was told about domestic violence and social responsibility by constructing a dialogue based upon the narratives, analyses, and literature review.

Data analysis involved two parallel efforts. One track followed Richardson (2000) in the use of analytical writing; significant analysis occurred during the writing of the narratives. In a second track, more explicit thematic analysis of transcribed interview data was conducted using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software and hand coding of non-electronic written data.

The study is limited in that the number of participants was quite small. It is very personal, designed to get at participants' learning and understandings rather than any objective truths. It was designed for impact and to stimulate reflection in readers rather than to make broad claims about domestic violence.

### **Findings**

There is insufficient space here to fully address the richness of the findings, and therefore this section of the paper focuses only on the identity construct as it related to participants. The women all manifested distinct problems with identity going into their marriages. Problems included a weak sense of self, struggles with conforming to social norms, and a feeling of unattractiveness combined with a desire to be married. Several years ago, one participant wrote: "I had no strong sense of who I was or what I wanted, except that I wanted to get out of my parents' house and away from their influence. Getting married accomplished that; this man also resolved the question of who I was and what I wanted because he believed it was his job to define that for me."

All three endured substantial levels of emotional and psychological abuse for extended periods, above and beyond any physical violence. It was physical abuse, especially attacks on children that occurred in all three cases, which could not be seen as "normal" or be explained by difficulty in life's circumstances (for example, job loss). Each participant began to change before exiting the marriage, change that was characterized by a determination to be different in some way from the batterer-designated "self." This could be seen as the victim making an active effort to participate in her identity processes. For one participant, this involved an evening walk alone, in spite of her husband's angry opposition to the initiative. Participants made a conscious decision to exit the marriage, although the exiting was not always "clean" or immediate.

Each made strong early strides with a sense of self despite significant struggles. Participants used different means to bring about a sense of self-awareness that included counseling, writing, and study. In each case, upon exiting the abusive marriage, the victim found some "thing" larger than herself in which to become immersed. By locating herself in a larger social entity she was able to identify with that entity until such time as she had more functional identity processes. In one case the entity was church and the Christian God, whereas for another it was finding children kidnapped by non-custodial parents (she founded an organization while searching for her child).

Problems with social aspects of being a battered woman were pervasive, in particular social discourses of recovery and normalcy (Horsman, 2000). The survivors felt fundamentally changed, essentially different from many of the people they knew, after leaving the battering relationship. Some lost family members or friends. Well-meaning desires of friends and family for the survivor to return to “normal” proved problematic. Often these people congratulated the survivor on her courage and indicated sympathy in conjunction with a wish for her to forget that the violence ever happened. In fact, it was often the speakers who wanted to forget that the violence had occurred, while the domestic violence survivor was comfortable talking about domestic violence personally and as a social phenomenon. The whole idea of what “normal” meant changed for the women in the study.

Social awareness increased dramatically and social issues emerged as important for participants after they left their abusive situations. They were frustrated by others’ lack of understanding and/or interest in the same issues. That is, there was a strong sense of social responsibility and a notable sense of social that had been mostly or completely lacking before their abusive relationships. One example is the inevitable “Why doesn’t she just leave?” that arises in conversation or debates related to domestic violence. This perennial question was a flashpoint with study participants, who felt that the *asking* of this question demonstrated social ignorance of domestic violence. Participants had all received threats of death or stalking if they left their batterers; each woman had consciously accepted the probability that she would die. One kept records before and during preparations for her and her children’s departure because she hoped to provide evidence for prosecution if he killed her before she could leave. Two were held at gunpoint. At the same time, each participant accepted the same risks on behalf of her children; in one participant’s case the batterer made good on his threats and kidnapped their son, who was subsequently missing for four years. In deciding to leave the women were also accepting financial hardship, reduced resources, social stigma, and loss of family and friends during a time when they lacked confidence and suffered a state of severe emotional and psychological distress. Asking the question clearly showed that the asker did not have a strong grasp of the realities a battered woman faces in leaving a violent relationship.

Two of the participants had a strong sense of self-satisfaction that manifested even during periods of great stress. While all knew fear, very little intimidated these survivors. Each was good at assessing and accepting consequences for different types of actions in different situations. Few day-to-day challenges seemed as insurmountable and threatening as those experienced in dealing with the changes in moving from battered to non-battered woman, and all felt that they can handle the “lesser” challenges competently. The study participants believe that they could and did handle high levels of stress on an ongoing basis. All were more aware of social norms than they were before their abusive relationships and each felt a greatly reduced need to conform. None are presently married, for example; some participants would like a partner but thought acceptable ones would be difficult to find. One jest involved an “algorithm for men” that identified “deal-breakers” which amounted to a checklist of characteristics that were attributed to abusive personalities.

It should be remembered that these are *success* stories. The participants are women who got out and stayed out of battering relationships. Success is not necessarily just “moving on,” it is not clean or pretty, and participants in the study were well aware of that. Serious problems remain for survivors even years later. Financial pressures are prevalent. All have experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), one severely. At least two still feel guilt over suffering

experienced by children. In addition, there are issues with substance abuse, depression, general health and memory problems that render the word “success” problematic at best.

### **Implications for the Field**

Identity is identifiable as a learning process. This work bears a strong theoretical relationship to Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory in that it is about learners and change processes (transformation) through time. Particular elements, like the disorienting dilemma, are evident. The process used by two of the participants in reforming identity processes could be described fairly easily using Mezirow’s work. His work, for me, represents a description of one type of agency (critical reflection) combined with a description of some processes in identity shift. In this study the learner was more explicitly theorized than is done in transformation theory. While I share Mezirow’s view of critical reflection as a form of agency, avenues for agency are left more open with the identity construct as outlined in this study’s theoretical framework. In this work the affective and cognitive are seen as part and parcel of one another; they are given equal legitimacy.

Learning as understood in this study is a power relationship. While few would deny that, the relationship is frequently viewed in literature as one that benefits learners (e.g. Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is frequently portrayed as expert-novice relationships in education, where a novice benefits from the advice and expertise of an expert. Few learning theorists in adult education take on the more problematic aspects of power in learning relationships. Power in learning and identity processes represents an excellent avenue for further research. Exploration of power in learning for individuals and small groups, perhaps using a Foucauldian perspective, is warranted.

The sense of social described in this paper bears further development, particularly using the work of groups that identifiably have a strong sense of social. One group is people who live along marginalized axes of difference, for example postcolonialist feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Uma Narayan (1997). The learning identity construct as a whole would benefit from further reading of broader identity literatures. It is in its infancy, and would benefit from empirical research as well. Work with incarcerated women (Baird, 1999) or group identities are potentially good prospects. The construct is well suited to research with marginalized populations, yet can readily offer insight into mainstream social identities as well.

The practical-minded adult educator might ask what one could do with this research to benefit real people. A personal agenda is to understand enough about the identity processes of battered women to design educational programs that will best serve the women who are leaving or who have left battering relationships. There is a great deal at stake with this population; further empirical and theoretical research is needed to move responsibly toward that goal.

Education is a serious matter. If I want to be involved in high-quality, effective educational efforts, I believe it necessary to understand learners in a sophisticated way. Identifying and measuring needs is insufficient; one needs to know how the needs relate to learners and learners’ contexts. Only then is it desirable to begin thinking about curricula and teaching technique. This is especially true with at-risk populations like battered women, or if one is seeking to educate for social change. In this study, I attempted to conceptualize learners as people simultaneously functioning as individuals and part of a social milieu, such that the concept may be used to understand learners well enough to achieve the objective described above.

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