Intimate partner violence and the leaving process: Interviews with abused women

MARCIA SCHEFFER LINDGREN, PhD student & BARBRO RENCK, Associate Professor

Faculty of Social and Life Sciences, Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, Public Health, Karlstad University, Sweden

Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global health problem. Previous studies show the complexity of a violent relationship and provide different explanations for the reasons why the woman do not leave. Recently the focus has also been on to women who in fact leave their violent relationships. There is a call for more research on the leaving process to identify key factors potentially amenable for intervention. With aid of constructivist grounded theory, within a Swedish context and through qualitative in-depth interviews, the aim was to increase the understanding of abused women’s experience of leaving heterosexual violent relationships. The findings show that Fear is a central theme and phenomenon in the Process of leaving a violent relationship. Fear is described in many different ways and the analysis shows that these feelings function as both restraining and releasing factors. Three key categories, Restraining break up, Balancing between staying and leaving and Releasing turning point, were found and these could be related to the core category, Fearfulness as a driving force to leave.

Key words: Constructivist grounded theory, intimate partner violence (IPV), leaving process, fear

Introduction

Violence is a global public health problem. The violence that women are subjected to most commonly is interpersonal violence committed by an intimate partner. For many women home is a place of pain and humiliation. Intimate partner violence (IPV) has a wide definition and includes all forms of behaviour that result in sexual, physical or psychological harm to the partner. It is also maintained that men’s violence against women is a question of gender inequality and that health development and gender equality are closely interconnected (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002; WHO, 2005). Several studies and investigations show that intimate partner violence has a negative effect on women’s health, often involving symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as intrusion, avoidance and hyperarousal (Flouri, 2005) and other long-term mental health consequences (Basilie, Arias, Desai & Thompson, 2004; Campbell, 2002; Golding, 1999; Helweg-Larsen & Kruse, 2003; Krantz & Östergren, 2000; Lang, Kennedy & Stein, 2002; Lundgren, Heimer, Westerstrand, & Kalliokoski, 2001; Pico-Alfonso, 2005; Renck, 1997; Risberg, Lundgren & Westman, 1999; Romito, Turan & De Marchi, 2005; Zlotnick, Johnson & Kohn, 2006). Several studies also show the complexity of a violent relationship and provide different explanations for the reasons why the woman do not leave (Lundgren, 1991; Barnett, 2001). In recent years, interest has also come to focus on how and why abused women in fact leave violent relationships. A study among abused women in Nicaragua shows, for instance, that the women used different means to solve their situation, for example by leaving on a temporary basis (Ellsberg, Winkvist, Pena & Stenlund, 2001). A similar result is shown in a study of Spanish women. Many of the women try to solve their situation and are not passive victims (Ruiz-Perez, Mata-Pariente & Plaazaola-Castano, 2006). The results from a multi-country study on women’s health and IPV shows that there is a strong link between leaving a violent
relationship and the severity of physical violence, “the woman could not endure more, she was badly injured, or her partner had threatened or tried to kill her” (WHO, 2005, p. 2). WHO (2005) also calls for more research on the subject to bring a deeper understanding of risk and protection factors related to intimate partner violence, particularly in identifying key factors potentially amenable for intervention. Andersson and Saunders (2003) explain how some women who have just left the relationship may have greater psychological difficulties than those who are still in it, and call for more research on leaving as a process.

The aim of the present study was, within a Swedish context, to increase the understanding of abused women’s experience of leaving heterosexual violent relationships. We aimed to gain deeper knowledge about how the leaving process works, from the first thoughts about leave or efforts to leave, until the final physical break up.

Method

Constructivist grounded theory and method is used for data collection and analysis. Grounded theory emerged from Glaser and Strauss (1967), and can be used for studying social processes, but over the years has developed in different directions. However, grounded theory involves a number of fundamental strategies such as simultaneous data collection and analysis; an inductive method of constructing codes and categories from data; using constant comparisons during each stage of the analysis; theory development during the research process; memo-writing; defining relationships between categories; using theoretical sampling; and an independent analysis before conducting the literature review (Charmaz, 2006a).

More than Glaser’s classical grounded theory, having a position close to positivism (Hallberg, 2006), a constructivist perspective by Charmaz (2006a) is in line with the theoretical and methodological developments of the past decades, and forms a contrast to the view of an objective reality, which can be discovered by the “neutral” scientist, as Glaser and Strauss formulate it in their classic work. Charmaz explains that through a constructivist perspective, we are rather a part of the world we study and the data we collect and the grounded theories are constructed through our past and present experiences and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. “My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz 2006a, p. 10).

Participants and procedure

Data were collected between October 2005 and October 2006 from in-depth interviews with fourteen women who had been living in heterosexual violent relationships in different places in Sweden. Contact with the respondents was gained through shelters for battered women, from crime victim shelters, from one lawyer and from private contacts. At the time for the interviews, all of the women had at least physically, left their relationships, which was the criteria for participating. The relations had endured from about one year to approximately 16 years and the definitive break up had taken place some time during the last five years, except from one relation that ended earlier. The respondents’ characteristics varied by age (from 25 years to 50 years at the time of interview) and socioeconomic status. Twelve of the women were born in Sweden, one in Norway and one woman was born in an Arabic country. Twelve of the women had children, either from an earlier relationship or with the abuser. The sample-size was not decided in advance, according to an inductive approach. After 14 interviews a theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews varied in time from one hour to about three hours, they were taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

A constructivist perspective emphasizes the respondents’ narratives of their experience. Therefore, an open interview style was used with a few questions formulated in advance in order to give the women the opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences freely, questions like, how did you meet? What was the relationship like? When did the violence start and what kind of violence was used? How did you feel and react? What happened then? The participants showed during the interviews a strong need to talk about the relationships, the men and the violence as a way to describe and explain their leaving processes. We found it necessary, therefore, also to present in our results, not the women’s separation isolated, but also the circumstances that caused it, in order to render the leaving process understandable in a wider context. The definitions of IPV was not given forehand to the participants, but were defined by themselves through their narratives.

Data analysis

There are many ways of coding data. Glaser (1978) is talking about different coding families where one is process, as a causal-consequence model. He assumes that a process must have at least two stages and it is a way of grouping together at least two sequencing parts to a phenomenon. With Glaser’s process
coding family as a starting point the analytical steps in the present study followed Charmaz’ model constructivist approach and included

...coding the interviews and personal accounts for statements about what was happening and what people were doing and how they felt, developing tentative categories concerning these topics that were explored in further interviews, writing memos on the categories and showing the links between the categories (Charmaz, 2006b, p. 28).

With the aid of transcribed interviews data were coded, memos were written and diagramming was carried out. Parallel with the interviewing data were examined line by line to identify the substance of what data actually represent. The coding process overlapped with the process of formulating conceptual categories, meaning a constant comparison (Hallberg, 2006). Data were coded, compared and explored in further interviews, and recoded until categories began to emerge. A core category gradually emerged. This core category was described and isolated and emerging categories and subcategories were described and sorted around that core category. The concept of category is used to describe phenomena, which have a certain meaning for people and help them structure the world. The collection and analysis of the data was terminated when no new information could be obtained. Memo-writing and diagramming on the categories showed the links between the categories.

Ethical considerations

Before each interview the woman were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study, they were told that participation was voluntary, that they had the right to withdraw at any time and that data would be handled confidentially. Preparations were made to provide care for the informants if the interview raised questions of such a sensitive nature that the informants needed to discuss them further. This did not occur. The study was approved by the local Research Ethics Committee at Karlstad University, Sweden (UFO2004/251).

Findings

The findings highlight experiences, events and feelings common to the majority of the women’s narratives. One core category and central phenomenon emerged, Fearfulness as a driving force to leave, and this was related to three key categories: Restraining break up, Balancing between leaving and staying, releasing turning point, and generated a model describing the leaving process for abused women (see Figure 1).

Even though the analysis reveals a very similar pattern in all the relationships, the violence took many different forms of expression. All the relationships involved some form of physical violence. In a couple of them, the physical violence only occurred on two occasions. Several of them involved physical and psychological violence on a daily basis. In one case, apart from some sexual violence, there was only psychological violence. Ten of the 14 cases involved some form of sexual violence. In some of them, the sexual violation was of a very severe kind.

Fear is a central theme in the women's narratives. The whole process of breaking up is permeated with these feelings, which will be shown by way of explaining the categories and subcategories that was found through the analysis. With fear follows feelings such as disquiet and worry, stress, a sense of chaos, shame, anxiety, confusion, ambivalence, traumatization, emotional bonds, shock or terror. Different forms of fear that can have the effect of both preventing the women from leaving and of encouraging them to do so, but they are expressed in many different ways when the women talk about the violence, their partner, children and the separation.
The first phase of the leaving process is marked by several factors keeping the women from breaking up, such as the passionate feelings of love to the men, the insidious onset of violence, the oscillating between violence and tenderness, adaptation and the hoping for change, focusing on one’s children and feelings of shame and guilt. In the next step of the process the women make different attempts to leave because of a gradual escalating violence, but the men’s refusal to let go causes ambivalent feelings on behalf of the women, and the process becomes a question of balancing between leaving or staying. In the last phase of the leaving process the whole situation develops into a releasing turning point and a final break up, in many cases thanks to external support, and the women reach a kind of final realization that the violence will never end or that the situation becomes so threatening that they finally simply feel forced to choose between leave or die, or they feel that the children are in danger. The analysis also revealed a gradual development of strong emotional bonds, through the relationship and the whole leaving process, towards the men on the part of the women interviewed.

Restraining break up

In the respondents’ narratives, there was a clear pattern of restraining factors that prevented the woman from leaving, all of which are seen, through the analysis, to be related to fear in one way or another.

Passionate love

The point of departure was in most relationships passionate love affairs rapidly established, without the man and woman having previously known each other. The love affair and the emotional bonds to the man were strong restraining factors throughout the whole process of breaking up. The respondents described how at first they experienced the men as very charming, courteous, attentive, loving and exciting and not as “ordinary” men and this generated very positive feelings. One woman expressed this in the following terms: “He came along riding on a white horse and showed me the world”. Several of the women had recently broken up from a previous relationship. One of them had even left a long-term and well-functioning relationship for this man. The analysis shows that the onset of violence on behalf of someone who is supposed to show love and care then caused a lot of confusion, anxiety and fear, and will be described further below.

The insidious onset of violence

Through the interviews the women described how the violence occurred in a more or less insidious and gradual manner, first finding expression in the form of psychological violence through control, jealousy and disparaging comments about the woman, her relatives or friends, and attempts to circumscribe her existence. They felt that something was wrong and that they had an uneasy feeling but did not really want to see it or quite simply did not know how to handle it. The respondent’s had been in other relationships where there had not been any violence, or saw the man’s behaviour as an expression of love and care. One woman described the controlling behaviour on the part of the man that gradually emerged as follows:

I wasn’t aware, I mean I had no idea that he could use force and control, I thought it was more a matter of care … [later in the interview] I felt there was something wrong but I couldn’t deal with it, I didn’t know how to deal with it.

Jealousy was evident in all the men, according to the respondents’ descriptions. One woman recounted:

In the beginning I was always careful to make sure I had showered and so before he came so that I was clean and presentable and made up and stood looking at clothes and so on. Later on I stopped doing so because he wondered why I looked so nice and had taken a shower before he came home, whether it was to hide something. That was the case when he had been in xxx those two days, I didn’t shower or change clothes, not even under-clothes just to be able to prove that I hadn’t had sex with anyone.

The man in this relationship often examined the woman’s genitals to check whether she had been unfaithful. Another woman described the man’s jealousy in these terms:

Then I noticed once when I was in xxx and he phoned and asked me: ‘Tell me as usual what are you going to do now?’—No, we are going out for lunch—‘Well, who?’ And so I rolled off a list of names and there was a man in the group, and that made him mad. He shouted at me to lock myself in the toilet and I will come and pick you up.

The women also told how they were manipulated and how fast everything went and the chaos this created. One woman said: “So now afterwards I am
so awfully ashamed that I didn’t manage to think, that I was robbed of my ability to think very rapidly”.

Often the first (severe) physical violence came as a shock to the women and completely without warning and they were very frightened at the man’s aggressive behaviour. They talked about how black the man’s look was on those occasions. One of the women described this fear in the following terms:

And he flew up out of the chair and gripped me in a stranglehold and pushed me up against the wall ... and I saw then, it felt as though he had just changed personality, it was someone else, and his eyes, I will never forget them, damn me what hatred [chokes back the tears] ... they were jet-black and it scared me to death ... [sobbing].

One of the women said how shocked and sad she became on one occasion when she was pregnant:

And I know that then I just went and lay down and was so awfully sad since I thought that it was something you just didn’t do, you can argue and shout but damn me you don’t go and knock someone over ... really shocked because I never thought he could do anything like that.

However, the respondents recounted that the psychological terror was the worst. One woman, for instance, told how her partner used to threaten her with a knife: “He could come up to me, he had a kitchen knife which he held a bit from me [demonstrated with her hand against her throat]”.

Oscillating between violence and tenderness

Oscillating between violence and tenderness was through the analysis understood as a factor preventing leaving, and related to fear and uncertainty. The relationships swung between warmth and violence, as one of the women put it, “but then the other side [the loving side] was so intense as if I was tried drive this [the violence] away in some way”.

The men showed remorse, asked for forgiveness and reconciliation after the violent episodes. At the same time, they claimed that it was the woman and her behaviour, for instance his continual suspicions about her unfaithfulness or his criticism of her cooking, clothes or appearance that caused the violence. One of the women commented on her partner’s continual suspicions of her unfaithfulness:

... it often doesn’t take more than a few hours before he apologises. He says this very many times and is very distressed ... and then he often turns it against me, as it were, and says you must under-

Adaptation and the hoping for change

The women’s adaptation to the men’s behaviour and the hope of change is understood as a strong restraining factor and related to fear. The respondents described their various efforts to adapt to their partner, for instance by changing their own behaviour and trying to balance the man to avoid the reoccurrence of violence. One woman recounted how she thought “if I were just a little nicer, if I just did what he says”. Another described how the whole relationship revolved around “eliminating the causes”.

At the same time, the respondents pointed out that it did not really help however they behaved or whatever they did, the violence occurred anyway: “later on it was the case that even if you did all he said, it was something else anyway”.

The periods of affection or at least calm within the relationships led the women to hope that the violence would cease at the same time as they were fearful about when the next violent episode will occur. One woman described the continual fear of what would happen next in the following terms: “It is still so deep-seated, the fear of what he will do that you have no chance of parrying it, you have no idea what will enrage him since you are abused for everything”.

Focusing one’s children

Nearly all the respondents had children either from an early relationship or with the man in question. Having children together was through the analysis interpreted as a powerful factor against leaving, which in the violent relationships could be clearly linked with fear and stress. Much of the women’s energy was spent on keeping the peace between the children and the men and protecting the children from witnessing the violence or being exposed to it themselves. One woman who had several children from an earlier marriage and then had one with the man who assaulted her, said several times during the interview: “I had to maintain a balance between him and the children all the time ... to make sure that the children had peace and quiet”. Another woman described how she thought and acted as she was
lying on the kitchen floor being hit repeatedly about the head: “And I don’t cry out because I don’t want to wake the children”. As the women clearly showed, the fact that the man you love demonstrates such a violent nature creates extreme anxiety and stress.

**Feelings of shame and guilt**

The respondents described how they felt a severe shame and guilt for the violence, and one reason for that was the men’s blaming the women. Moreover, the feelings of shame at having failed in a (further) relationship acted as a powerful restraining factor against leaving. As one woman put it, “Yes there was an awful sense of shame, I felt a terrible guilt”. Wilkinson (2005) well describes how we all are concerned with our worries how we are seen by others and the link between feelings of shame, fear and social anxiety. Another woman described her feelings of shame and guilt in these words:

I noticed but I suppressed it because I came from a decent family and had left a good marriage, just bought a bakery and built a house and just left everything. I think I noticed after a month or so that this was not right but then I thought there is perhaps something wrong with me.

Owing to the man’s violence the women began thinking relatively early in the relationship about leaving. For some of them these thoughts did not arise until after the violence had gone on for a relatively long time. However, the restraining factors, related to fear, and the emotional bonds, which we have described, made it difficult to take that step. Nevertheless, a common feature of all the narratives was the gradual escalation of the various forms of violence, which for the women interviewed led to the next step in the process. The whole situation became a question of balancing between staying or leaving.

**Balancing between leaving and staying**

**Gradual escalating violence**

A gradual escalation of the various forms of violence was a typical element in the narratives and resulted in the women’s attempts to leave the relation. An example of this escalation of violence was the powerful sexual drive, which the women found exciting at first but which in time became destructive and violent. One woman, who fell headlong in love with the man because of his charm and sexual attraction, was gradually exposed to gross sexual abuse. She commented:

His extreme and endless desire for sex continually surprised me. Every evening he came home, he absolutely smothered me in hungry kisses which immediately led to sex. And once was never enough. Sometimes I smilingly tried to point out that I could not manage it as often as he could. Then he smiled back and wondered jokingly whether I had already met someone that day.

She felt that she could not satisfy him but hoped that his sexual lust would gradually diminish. She believed that everybody had a lot of sex at the beginning of a relationship. Instead, the sex escalated to become increasingly violent and humiliating, but if she did not go along with it, the man accused her of being unfaithful. The woman suffered from continual urinary infections and her anus was damaged from all the anal sex she was forced to undergo to prove her faithfulness, which was central to their relationship.

One woman described how the man raped her in front of their child. Another was raped in the evening of the same day that their newborn baby had died from sudden infant death syndrome. A further woman recounted that after a late abortion she was not allowed to have sex for six weeks. After two weeks, she was brutally raped by the man, (one of the few men who did not show any repentance after his acts of violence) and suffered terrible pain:

...I asked him to stop, it hurt so much while he was doing it. Then I went upstairs and tried to go to the toilet. And start to bleed profusely and I am in great pain and just, you are so shocked yourself, but you must do something you must call an ambulance or something as I was in such pain, I was bent double and the blood just ran. And I made it there (the bathroom) and you try like, God what shall I do. And the only thing he did was to come in and throw a blasted cleaning cloth over me and shout that you will bloody well have to clean up as you have covered everywhere in blood ....

The analysis showed that as result of the increasingly severe violence in the relationships, the women attempted to break up, either in the form of literally throwing their partner out, moving to another town or talking to him about divorce. One woman simply asked her partner to let her go. Despite the fact that the women were in a terrible condition from the treatment they had been subjected to in the form of various kinds of threat and despite the emotional bonds to their men, they showed a surprising ability to act. One woman said: “I don’t know how many times I threw out the bin bags with his stuff.”
The man does not let go

However, the analysis showed that the major problem in general was that the men refused to let go of the women. Rather the situation became even worse, through the man’s persecution, an escalation of the threats and very often, at the same time, promises to improve, and it caused ambivalent feelings. Uncertainty about where the man was and the continual worry where he would turn up next was for some women a reason for letting him return, as one woman said: “So I have a motto, that it is better to have hell inside the door than outside, since I had no control if he was outside”. How difficult the combination of the man’s threats when the woman talked about her desire to leave him and the woman’s feelings of guilt made it to take the step of definitively breaking up was clear from the following comment: “I felt so terribly ashamed and he had threatened me. If you leave here, then I have contacts, you will die you bastard”. The narratives revealed that the women constantly had to balance different strategies to handle the situation, and to balance between staying and leaving.

One woman described how her partner reacted when she brought up the question of divorce:

And it was … it depends a bit for sometimes like this that … that he would die, sometimes he assaulted me. And sometimes he just threatened that yes do that but then you will never see xxx (their son) … again. So it was one of those solutions and I just felt, no I can’t go through with it. And so on with that coat again, that now everything will be all right.

Since, as the violence escalated, the women felt increasingly drained of energy, traumatized, emotionally bonded, in the man’s power and even more frightened, they could not resist but took the men back. Paradoxically, the women described the strong feelings that even in this situation they still had for the men. The woman who time and again threw out the man’s possessions continued: “… strong for a moment then the next minute admit defeat and bring them [the bin bags] back in again”. The narratives showed how the women had to balance between staying and leaving as temporary solution.

One of the women described how her energy was, as it were, insufficient to make a definitive break:

It was short-term, in the short-term it was always easiest to return since I knew that the day I really end the relationship I must be really mentally prepared and … and also know that I am strong enough to manage it, and I wasn’t then.

Another woman clearly demonstrated the power the man had over her:

In any case I yielded in the end and met him and that was it. I couldn’t cope with meeting him. I found that out in court as well, since I thought I could manage to testify against him when I saw him in court but I couldn’t.

The strong emotional bond to the man was clearly described by one of the women:

… for in some way it feels as if the more he hit me the more I loved him, in some sort of sick way that was the case … Then it was, then I was at one of those low points and felt well … perhaps I will go back to xxx (the man) sort of. I don’t know but it was this pressure all the time, he never left you alone and then they are, it is so hard to explain but they have such power, such an allure, I don’t want to, but I must, something like that.

Releasing turning point

The analysis showed that finally the women reached, because of some decisive event or experience, a point in the relationship, which resulted in the woman feeling forced to make a definitive break (at least purely physically) with the man either immediately or in time, as a releasing turning point. Although even in the early stages of the relationship the men tried to restrict and control the women’s lives and psychologically break them down, they did not succeed completely. One woman recounted how she did not allow herself to be completely isolated:

“Then he complained about my friends and said they were no good in order to try and restrict me even more … I held on to them and they to me. I was lucky there.”

Another woman described how she managed to avoid being completely broken down:

And I think it was because I got out, that depended, I feel, on the fact that I have a solid base to stand on. Even though I was so torn apart, he somehow never managed to get to the core of my being.

A final realisation

The men described by the women vary in age and social status. One, for instance, was a highly respected senior physician, another, a so-called skinhead with little higher education. Some of the men
had stable jobs whilst for several others the situation was relatively unstable. The interviews indicated that the violence in the majority of the relationships was not alcohol or drug-related. A common feature in the women’s narratives was the description of severe and systematic violence where the women gave a clear indication that the men showed varying degrees of disturbance in their behavioural patterns and actions, and that the violence would never end. Several of the women went as far as saying that the man was a psychopath and/or narcissist and described how this insight became a turning point.

The respondents gave a clear description of the destructive side of the man’s personality or rather that he had two contrasting personalities. As one woman expressed it:

But I have realized over the years that he shows the side, the game that he thinks the other person wants to see, then he acts differently to everybody. I have seen all his sides, from the desperate little crying child to a raging fury where he shifts identity as he abuses. He is a completely different person, you can’t reach him in those states.

Another woman described, on the other hand, how controlled the violence could appear and how the man seemed to enjoy it:

For how shall I put it, when he abuses you, he as it were does it a little at a time, he does, perhaps throttles you until you can’t breathe and then laughs and looks to see how long you can stand it . . .

The majority of the men in the narratives showed a perfect outer façade, looked neat and tidy and they were verbally gifted; they were not violent towards others apart from their partner. However, a couple of the men was unable to control their aggressive personality even in public and the sense of shame at the man’s behaviour and the insight that he had in fact some form of personality disorder meant that in some cases the women’s feelings cooled and this became a releasing turning point:

But then I actually began to despair when it happened more and more often and became worse and worse and he even disgraced us . . . at parties both at his workplace and mine, in our private life when mum and dad were present. In the end I felt that I can’t be together with someone I am so ashamed of, and then I was no longer in love at all. Then it was just, it was like blowing out a candle.

Another woman described how her feelings finally evaporated during an incident of extreme violence. “And then I felt, no this is it, now he destroyed the last thing there was.”

The repentance that the men showed after the violence was just a game to manipulate the woman into forgiving them. One woman described a situation:

. . . I creep, pull myself up the stairs and lock myself in the toilet. And then I hear him come up and stand snivelling outside the door although he is not crying. He has never cried, I have never seen a tear in his eyes but he often pretended to cry.

From several of the interviews it was evident that the woman had found out that the man had committed serious crimes of violence in previous relationships. This knowledge increased the women’s fear and was a strong driving force for them to terminate the relationship. One woman commented: “And then she said, yes he has a conviction for abuse of women and he has hit women before and this scared me to death”.

External support

The interviews revealed that after the break up several of the women established a new relationship with a non-violent man and this acted as an important element in their leaving process. Meeting another man gave them the strength to make the definitive break: “He was completely mad (the violent man). And he, I still couldn’t cope, if I hadn’t had him (the new man) to hold my hand, I would’ve taken the next flight back (to the violent man)”.

Others had received considerable support and help from outside in order to be able to make a definitive break, through friends and support organisations such as women’s refuge. The friends of one of the women refused to let go and saw to it that she went to the shelter for battered women to talk to them.

. . . and then she (at the shelter) said I am not letting you go from here until you understand that you have met an abuser and that you are a victim. And I was awfully lucky for otherwise I think it would have been easy to forgive him again.

The narratives did not reveal much support from health care providers. On the contrary, some of the women expressed how they have wished that medical staff had been able to see and to ask more about the causes of the women’s injuries and their bad psychological condition. One woman said:
“That was the first time I broke down, I can say ... and what you feel is why couldn’t they catch it then, so to say, what is it, why are you like that”.

**Forced to choose between leave or die**

The narratives were marked by a lot of talk about death, and how the final break up was simply a matter of life or death. This might have been the fear of actually being killed by the man or thoughts about suicide as there seemed to be no way out. Three of the women even spoke of the risk of hurting or killing the man as a final and desperate solution. One of the women described in the following terms her thoughts about killing her partner as the final way out:

And I have told the police this, I have told the social services, I have told everybody, that it will end in a murder if I don’t get out and get help to break the relationship. And it is not certain that he will be the murderer, it could just as well be me.

One woman recounted how she finally did not dare to eat her food for fear of being poisoned. Another described her fear of dying in the following way: “And I feel with the situation we were in then, I daren’t go to sleep until he was asleep for I was scared he would kill me in my sleep”. One woman had the following thoughts about committing suicide:

“I even had sleeping pills because I couldn’t sleep, and I stood with the bottle in my hand and wondered whether I should take them [bursts into tears] or whether I should get up and leave.”

Some of the women were subjected to such an acute violent episode that they fear for their life and are forced them to flee. One woman noted, “It was 22° below freezing and pitch black. I ran into the woods”.

**Protecting one’s children**

The women focused very much on protecting their children and described how they, from at first have been a restraining factor, they gradually became a driving force to leave the relationship. Their worry about how the children were directly or indirectly affected by the violence and the risk that the man might even have subjected them to various kinds of violence or the realization that he actually had done so was a strong contributory factor leading to a definitive turning point. One woman described how the final realization that her 11-year-old son time and again came between her and her husband in order to protect his mother, that the whole situation was completely untenable, was the definitive turning point:

... and it was not the first time he had stood between him and me. And I thought but what the hell am I doing here, what do I expect of this. How many times is my son to stand and protect me so that his dad doesn’t hit me.

Another woman gave the following account of the turning point:

And then I know that on one occasion ... he was angry with me and I don’t really know why. I think it was because she [the baby] cried and then he went for me and took hold of my hair in the back of my neck and just turns me round as I stood like this (as if holding a baby) with xxx [the baby], turns me to the wall and then stands and begins banging her and me against the wall. I try as much as I could to resist but it is not so easy, so both she and I go into the wall ... and I shout and ask what are you doing, what are you doing ... And I think of her and she is crying hysterically. He did this ten or fifteen times and then left. And there I was, first I was, it hurt and I was worried about her and everything ... but above all the shock ... I didn’t think he would ever do anything to her. It was then, I think, the penny dropped that I had to get away from here ... somehow.

The definitive turning point for another woman was the realisation that her children had actually been sexually abused:

And then I understood that he had violated my children. So I called him at the crayfish party and said what the hell do you think you’re doing, then I began to dare to put my foot down and I didn’t give a damn about the consequences. And I said you are not welcome, enough is enough, now you’re out for good.

**Discussion**

The overall analysis shows that the women’s leaving process is marked to a large extent by various emotions related to fear. For instance, a sense of disquiet; an increasing fear of the gradually emerging violence; confusion at the men’s oscillation between tenderness and violence; fear of the men and their deviating behaviour; worry and stress concerning their own safety; but above all that of the children, feelings of shame and guilt; fear of death; various kinds of fear that act both as a restraining and releasing factor; and finally as a driving force out of
the relationship throughout the leaving process. All the women in the study tried to solve the situation in different ways, for instance by adapting, by trying to balance the men to prevent further violence and, because of the escalation in the violence, by making various attempts to leave and to balance between staying and leaving. Since the fact the men would not let go, because of their threats and other psychological terror, promises to improve, the women’s uncertainty as to where the men were, and the women’s emotional bonds to their partners, they took them back, several times before the final break came. What made the women finally able or rather caused them to feel forced to take the step of definitively releasing breaking with the men immediately or eventually was a final realization, in several cases in combination with some form of external support. In many cases, it is the realization that the man has a deviating personality and that the violence will never end, or quite simply the fear for their own or their children’s lives.

The results from this study show that leaving for most of the women is a long lasting process, resulting at the end in a final physical separation. The women make several attempts to leave before the definitive break up. This is confirmed by other authors who have maintained that battered women make a number of attempts to leave before they succeed, on average three to five according to Dobash and Dobash (1980) and Walker (1979), even an average of six times is reported by Barnett, Miller-Perrin and Perrin (1997). As our model shows, the process includes several stages and do not advance on a straight line, rather like two steps forward, one-step back and so on. It is hoped the results of this study may contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of a violent relationship and the way out of it. The psychological leaving process may continue for a long time after the physical break up, but this was not within the aim of this study.

The conceptual category of restraining factors in our model has similarities with what is called the normalization process, a process in which the maintenance of the relationship is possible through controlling the woman and minimizing her living space. The woman gradually adapts the abuser’s view of her and internalizes the violence as something normal (Lundgren, 1991).

The releasing turning point in a violent relationship, that we have found through our analysis are discussed in a similar way by Eliasson (2003), who reports that the women may reach a kind of breaking point when the violence severely escalates or when the children also are being directly abused. The results of our study also show how children are affected in different ways by the violence, as are reported by Janson and Almqvist (2000); Eriksson (2003) and Weinahall (2005). This is a serious and important topic, but that was not within our specific focus.

There seems to be a notion that it is a woman’s initial desire to leave that may cause the man’s violence. It is abundantly clear that it is the men’s violence that causes the women to leave, not the opposite. The results of a study on separation violence show that it is very uncommon that men who have not previously exercised violence in a relationship start to do so in connection with or after a separation. Thus, it is women who have already been exposed to violence who risk being subjected to separation violence (Ekbrand, 2006).

Our study show that external human support can act as an important element in women’s leaving process. Support from understanding others can act as a door opener or give the women strength to find ways to escape and finally to break up, which is reported by Häggbom and Möller (2007).

Hyden (1999) interviewed 10 battered women who had left their relationship. Her analysis also shows that fear is a central theme in the relationship, where fear is not just a restraining factor but is also a matter of opposition and thus that battered women are not merely passive victims. Above all, her findings make it clear that fear, both a general sense of fear and a fear of the men, is a characteristic feature of the women’s lives long after the separation and prevents them from getting on with their lives.

Using an interview survey of women who have lived with battering men, Holmberg and Enander (2004) show how fear in a violent relationship is a powerful and permeating feeling, which is just as strong as love and which really is a matter of life, both physical and/or psychological life (see also Lundgren et al., 2001); a fear which their study found also acts as both a restraining and a liberating factor in the process of separation. They use the concept of traumatic bonding, taken from Dutton and Painter (1981), to describe the intertwining of the woman’s various feelings, which together constitute the traumatic bond with the man and thus the difficulties involved in leaving an abusive relationship. Traumatic bonding has previously been used in connection with attempts to explain the emotional bonds that are forged between for instance hostages and their kidnappers, members and the leader of sects, and abused children and abusing parents as well as the positive feelings the victim develops towards the perpetrator. Traumatic bonding was introduced by Dutton and Painter (1981) in connection with IPV. A precondition for the occurrence of traumatic bonding is that there exists an uneven balance of power between the parties, the recurrent physical and/or psychological abuse on the part of...
one of the parties and the oscillation between warmth and violence in the relationship (ibid).

The findings of the present study show that the concept of traumatic bonding can be linked to much of what the women described in their narratives, for instance the oscillation between violence and warmth, the feelings the women said they still felt for the men and the powerful influence that the women experienced the men had over them. This explains much of the difficulty the women had in definitively leaving the men physically, but above all, emotionally. One of the women expressed this traumatic bonding particularly clearly (under the part *The man does not let go*) by describing how the more she was hit by the man, the more she loved him, and how the power and the allure made her feel that she simply had to return to the man, even though she did not want to. One reflection on the phenomenon of traumatic bonding, as well as on fear, is that it may well be even stronger when the relationship is fundamentally a matter of love and affection on the part of the woman, as also are described by Eliasson (2003), and confirms the close connection between love and fear.

Holmberg and Enander (2004) speak of the women’s hatred towards the men as one of the emotional phases in the leaving process. There was very little in the women’s narratives in this study that might have been interpreted as hatred towards the men. The dominant feature in the narratives, as has been indicated in the findings, was the powerful feeling of fear but also of love and emotional attachment. Traumatic bonding and the positive feelings that the women develop towards the perpetrators explain rather why the feeling of hatred is not something that has emerged in the analysis of this study.

The focus in this study has been on women who have left a relationship. It is possible that many women never succeed in leaving their relationship through fear and traumatic bonding with the men. That these women succeeded in leaving violent relationships might be due to the fact that they were not completely broken, traumatized or isolated. Other women may try to find strategies for going on living in a violent relationship instead of leaving their partner. Zink, Jacobson, Pabst, Regan and Fisher (2006) show, for example, how older women use different coping strategies to find meaning in a situation they perceive as unchangeable (see also Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh and Winstock, 2000).

One of the women comes from a culture other than that of Western Europe. Even though this woman used different concepts from the others describing the relationship and the violence, for instance the concept of honour, it revealed more or less the same pattern as the others. Even though we found a similar pattern in all the narratives, it is also important to be aware of that memories of violent events are always experienced in different ways and in different contexts, as are described in Eisikovits and Winstok (2002). It is possible that the women’s narratives have been influenced by the length of the relationship with the man, the severity of the violence and even by the length of period since they left the relationship, for example because of forgotten or repressed events, which has also been discussed in Häggbloom and Möller (2007). The consequences for the health of the women may also have been influenced by these factors.

With a constructivist perspective, this article presents an interpretative picture of data and through the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewed, not an exact picture of a phenomenon, as Charmaz (2006a) put it. To our knowledge, abused women’s leaving process has never before been presented in a model like this, grounded in data from abused women. It is hoped this deeper knowledge about the complexity of the leaving process for abused women could be useful both for legal and social authorities and for health care services. A study, exploring nurses role as health care providers to abused women, showed that skilled nurses showed a deep concern about and commitment toward those women and are or can be an important link in the health team (Häggbloom & Möller, 2006). It must be of great importance to increase knowledge about this serious public health problem, and to encourage medical staff to dare to see and dare to ask, so that they can provide adequate assistance when they suspect someone being subjected to IPV. The consequences of IPV for health, traumatization and PTSD will be the subject of a coming study. IPV is a serious crime, but almost universally under-reported (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). It must be of importance to encourage women to report these crimes to the police. There is a need for a deeper knowledge about the legal procedure in cases of IPV. The quality of preliminary investigations, concerning reported cases, will also be the subject of a coming study.

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