The Protective Order Process as a Victim Empowering Response to Domestic Violence: An Investigation in a Rural Iowa Setting

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THE PROTECTIVE ORDER PROCESS AS A VICTIM EMPOWERING RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: AN INVESTIGATION IN A RURAL IOWA SETTING

by

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This project would have never been possible without the assistance of Joyce DeHaan, director of the Domestic and Sexual Assault Outreach Center in Fort Dodge, Iowa. I am privileged to have witnessed her and her staff innovatively and passionately empowering victims and fighting for social justice. Above all, I would like to acknowledge the participants of this research. They endured such hardships in their lives and sacrificially took the time to share their expertise with me. I will always think of them often and be grateful for their contribution.

Traci L. Ketter
This research began with an interest in societal responses to domestic violence. I was curious about protective orders, as they seem to be relied upon heavily by our legal system. As one of the primary responses to domestic violence, I wanted to know whether this type of response was meeting the needs of petitioners. As I read the literature and formed research questions, it became clear that in order to answer the questions I had, I would need to go to the victims themselves. They would be the best source of information on the role of the protective order process in their lives.

Data for this project were collected in the form of 17 semi-structured interviews of female victims of domestic violence who had, at one time, applied for a protective order in response to a physically violent intimate partner (they did not need to have completed it). Subjects were solicited for participation with cooperation of the Domestic and Sexual Assault Outreach Center in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Results affirm previous publications in the area of domestic violence in regard to motivations for protective order filing as well as outcomes thereof. The exploratory results also raise new issues related to rural filing as well as the possible effects of a shelter and counseling programs that emphasize education of victims as well as the larger communities.
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INTRODUCTION

Considering that it is estimated that between three and four million women are abused by their intimate partners each year (Walker, 1998) and that this abuse is the most common cause of injury to females in this country (Fernandez, Iwamoto & Muscat, 1997), one can safely say that domestic violence (DV) constitutes a significant social problem. Throughout United States history, there have been various movements, beginning in the 1600’s, in which groups of concerned citizens have brought attention to and attempted to legislate against domestic abuse (Pleck, 1987). Traditionally, the focus of domestic violence research has been on the police and their failures to enforce anti-battering laws (Ptacek, 1999). Since the most recent movement, beginning in the 1970’s, there has been an effort in criminal justice to both criminalize woman battering as well as empower women by providing various kinds of aid to those in domestic violence situations (Carlson, Harris & Holden, 1999; Ptacek, 1999; Websdale & Johnson, 1997).

One of the most important efforts in criminalizing domestic assault and making the state responsible for the enforcement of domestic abuse laws has been in the implementation of civil stay away orders. In the 1980’s, changes in state legislation began to allow for criminal penalties of civil protective orders (DeJong & Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Eigenberg, McGuffee, Berry & Hall, 2003). This civil remedy was an important step as it added another recourse available to victims of domestic assault who may not be able or willing to file criminal charges. Additionally, the provisional language on protective orders in most states allows for the order to address the various needs of women who have been victimized such as child custody and child support (Chadhuri & Daly, 1992; Eigenberg, et al., 2003). By 1994, all 50 states had legislation
providing for civil protective orders as an alternative or supplement to criminal domestic violence proceedings (Carlson, et al., 1999). On the federal level, in 1994, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) as a part of the 1994 crime bill, mandated some nation-wide laws regarding civil protective orders. These included the prohibition of gun sales to those who have protective orders against them, the necessity of the respondent to be served before the order is active and the nation-wide honoring of protective orders across state and tribal borders (DeJong & Burges-Proctor, 2006).

While civil stay away orders have been called many things, they are referred to as 'protective orders' (POs) in this research because that is their current label in Iowa where the data were collected for this study. However, other states refer to them as restraining orders, injunctions, orders of protection or personal protection orders (Dobash & Dobash, 1992); these terms are treated synonymously in this research. They are the most common legal response to domestic violence (Ptacek, 1999). Although problematic in many ways, probably the most highlighted positive aspect of protective orders is that they can serve an important role in the emotional and structural empowerment of women (Coker, 2000; Eigenberg, et al., 2003; Fischer & Rose, 1995). They have also been shown in some cases to be associated with a decline in further abuse (Carlson, et al., 1999; Harrell & Smith, 1996; Horton, Simonidis & Simonidis, 1987; Klein, 1996). Thus, this research examined orders of protection as a possible tool of empowerment for women in domestic violence situations as well as the processes and procedures surrounding POs and how they affect women’s lives.

Research in all areas, especially rural areas, is needed in order to expand the base of in-depth, qualitative literature addressing women’s experiences with the PO process
(Websdale, 1995). The primary research question, as indicated by the title is: Do victims of domestic violence see the PO process as useful in empowering them in their efforts to make whatever changes they seek in their lives? To be more specific, I posed the following research questions: 1) What are the main obstacles women in this sample perceive in seeking orders of protection from the court as a solution to domestic violence? 2) Did they perceive the responses/actions of advocates, judges and shelter personnel, or other actors in the process as positive and helpful? 3) What role do victims see the PO process playing in their effort to achieve the goals for which they came to attempt to receive a PO? 4) Did they feel that the PO process was empowering in terms of their practical needs? (i.e., provisions of the PO addressing needs such as financial support/child support/living arrangements?) or in terms of their emotional needs? In order to address these questions, I looked to the PO petitioners themselves, collecting interview data from 17 women. The foundations and results of this study will be constructed using structured action theory. The empowerment of women will be a theme along the way since it has been shown in domestic violence literature as the key to confronting the patriarchy and reducing future acts of violence for individual women (Coker, 2000; Websdale & Johnson, 1997).

It is important to remember that domestic violence is not a phenomenon that occurs only within the context of male/female relationships where males perpetrate the majority of the violence. Rather, it is a problem that occurs in relationships of all types and circumstances (i.e., during marriage or after separation/divorce, dating and courtship, between male/female or same sex partnerships). However, the vast majority of the literature on domestic violence indicates that male on female assault is by far the most
common and severe form of domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Sorensen & Shen, 2005; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2000). Therefore, although domestic violence occurs in all segments of the population, female victims of male perpetrated domestic abuse are the primary focus of this project.

The bifurcated PO process is summarized in two basic steps in most states: a temporary order and a final order, which is more permanent (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Eigenberg, et al., 2003). While states’ procedures vary slightly, a common PO process includes several steps: the initial complaint and filing of forms, issuing of a temporary order, and finally, a permanent order after a hearing to determine the extent and provisions of the order (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Most states, including Iowa, have emergency orders, which are similar to temporary orders but can be filed on nights and weekends when the courts are not open (Eigenberg, et al., 2003). In Iowa, these emergency orders are effective in the same way as a temporary order and are good for up to 72 hours, until the plaintiff can go to the court during normal business hours and apply for a regular temporary order (Iowa Judicial Code 236.6, 2003). In Iowa, like most other states, the burden of proof is placed on the petitioner to show that the respondent abused her (Iowa Judicial Code 236.2, 2003). The people involved in the process include the victim or person making the complaint, offender or person responding to the complaint and judges, and in some cases, victim advocates, police officers and lawyers. There are obstacles in all stages of the process as well as notable improvements that have been made in the process, which will be addressed later in the literature review.

Chapter 236 of the Iowa Judicial Code made it easier for victims of domestic violence to go to courts and file on their own. This “pro se” action makes it easier by
using forms specifically related to domestic violence that the victims can fill out when they come to the court seeking protection from abuse (Iowa Judicial Code 236.3A, 2003). In order to take advantage of this, the victims must show that they are (or have been) in an intimate relationship with the person against whom they are filing.

The state statute prohibits the judge from issuing mutual protective orders (orders against both of the parties involved in the relationship based on the application of one) unless both people file for orders (Iowa Judicial Code 236.20, 2003). Something unique about civil POs in the state of Iowa is while they are uni-directional (that is, one person files against another and the order is against one party), the state law is clear that both the abuser and the petitioner can be fined or go to jail for voluntary violation. The Iowa Judicial Branch's website, addressing potential petitioners, states that if the petitioner is found to be voluntarily with the abuser “the police could arrest you and the abuser and the judge could hold you both responsible by putting you in jail or making you pay a fine” (Iowa State Court, 2002, p. 1). This detail is emphasized not only on the informational websites, but also in the informational packets given by police and also by the law enforcement officers verbally. In Iowa, violations of protective orders constitute a simple misdemeanor (Iowa Judicial Code 236.8, 2003). If convicted, the punishment is a jail sentence of no more than 30 days. The judge may also chose to find the respondent in contempt of court, which carries a jail sentence of up to six months (Iowa Judicial Code 236.8, 2003).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by structured action theory and founded in feminist methodology. Structured action theory addresses the "biases and stereotypes embedded in the social structure and cultural dynamics of mainstream society [that] cause problematic systematic reactions to victims of crime" (Hume, 2002, p. 2578). This theory, as constructed by Messerschmidt (1997) draws heavily from the work of Giddens (1976, 1984) on agency and structure. The principle notion of structured action theory is that people "construct social relations and structures" and then "these social structures constrain and channel behavior in specific ways" (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 3). So, while individuals have agency to act, their actions are guided by the structures in which they operate in everyday life. People act out their gender, class and race in certain ways that portray the image of themselves that they wish to impose (Messerschmidt, 1997). Structure, then, has regulative power over individuals insofar as a person buys into the images of gender, race or class found in the institutions of that society. By definition, structured action is "what people do under specific social structural constraints" (Messerschmidt, 1997, p. 6).

Since policy makers have created this civil PO process that is supposed to be helpful to victims of domestic violence, I look to structured action theory, which holds empowerment as key to social change in order to evaluate this process. So, a primary query of this research was to see if women in this sample find this process empowering. Structured action theory holds that power and material resources are key to the balance of power in a given situation. Social structures provide such hazards to women attempting
to leave violent relationships as lower wages for women compared to men in blue collar and entry-level work (Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Messerschmidt (1997) agrees that “specific social groups possess, or are restricted from access to, material resources, a situation that places them in an unequal social relation to other groups” (p. 8). This is why empowerment through material and educational resources is important to the needs of women in violent relationships. Indeed, Harrell and Smith (1996) and Websdale and Johnson (1997) found that empowering the victim through meeting or helping them meet their needs for affordable housing for themselves and their children as well as affordable daycare was the key to a structural approach to the protective order process in maintaining prosecution of offenders who violate orders and preventing recidivism.

A discussion of the power structures in violent relationships is needed in order to properly construct the problem. It is important to address emotional empowerment of battered women since literature on domestic violence supports the characterization of domestic violence in most cases as a process of taking away power from the victim (Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Important to this concept is the discussion of why “doing gender” for some males may include engaging in woman battering. This is an issue of power and control. The balance of power is not static in the daily routine of any particular person. Rather, it changes depending on one’s place in a given social situation. One may have and exert power in one relationship while having very little in another (Messerschmidt, 1997). So, for men who batter, this intimate relationship is a place where they portray an image of their masculinity that includes maintaining power over “their” woman. This leaves the woman feeling powerless; the possible reversal of this
powerlessness and emotional empowerment of these women is therefore key to looking at domestic violence on an individual level.

At the same time, battering itself can be considered emblematic of social structural problems since men are typically seen as the head of female/male relationships and therefore power, and the use of force when it is viewed as necessary, is commonly exercised (Messerschmidt, 1997). This is especially true in rural areas where traditional male/female roles are more widely accepted social norms (Websdale, 1995). While there is some debate about whether battering is an individual or a social structural problem, Ptacek (1999) views it as both in stating that, “Individual women are assaulted by individual men, but the ability of so many men to repeatedly assault, terrorize, and control so many women draws on institutional collusion and gender inequality” (p. 9). Clearly, looking further than into the psyches of individual men is important to understanding domestic violence.

Because structure guides action, the criminal justice system is an important point of focus, as it is commonly considered a patriarchal institution. It is a system “designed to reinforce social order” rather than shift power to the powerless (Ferraro, 1993, p. 165). So, while it is important to look at and define battering as a crime in terms of prosecution of offenders, this alone is not enough. We need to look at structured gender inequality and the outcomes it produces for battered women (Ferraro, 1993; Websdale & Johnson, 1997). This is why it is important to make inquiries into the needs of battered women and evaluate whether they are being met through the PO process since, while it is a civil process, it is still relied upon as a primary legal response to domestic violence. Additionally, while structure guides action, action also creates structure. (Messerschmidt,
1997). As such, this research will pay attention to how these women and this shelter are acting in ways that may be shaping societal structures.

The PO process, unfortunately, has at times been considered by academics as yet another oppressive element to women who are already oppressed within the context of their relationship, and arguably, by society (Ferraro, 1993). A huge problem in the process is the degree to which there are sexist, racist and classist biases in the system, as it typically works out better for white women who have the money to pay for an attorney to represent them (Moe Wan, 2000). The courts themselves are also commonly considered problematic as they are created within the larger patriarchal society and therefore there may be problematic structural components to the treatment of battered women, especially those of color or lower socioeconomic status, within the PO process (Giddens, 1984; Messerschmidt, 1997). Ferraro (1993), in her evaluation of the criminal justice system, determined that nowhere in the process does the criminal justice system address “any of the complex social economic problems of women” and argues that battering should be constructed as a ”manifestation of structured gender inequality” (p. 174, 175).

Therefore, the primary quandary of this research is whether or not orders of protection can be an empowering process for women as they seek to have their needs met, even though POs are a product of the arguably biased criminal justice system. Using structured action theory to guide an examination of the PO process is called for in order to reflect on it as another possible instrument of oppression rather than a tool of empowerment. Accounts of the experiences of individual women are needed in order to evaluate whether or not the actual needs of petitioners are being met either through the
completion of a PO, in the terms of a completed order, or in the ability/willingness of police officers to enforce orders of protection.

Obstacles and Problems with the PO Process for Victims of Domestic Abuse

Ptacek (1999) found that PO requests are on the rise. This is not necessarily an indication that abuse is on the rise but may be due instead to increased awareness of POs as an option because of news information and other media coverage (Ptacek, 1999). In other words, women may be increasingly seeing POs as an option for their safety. Most women who come to the PO process report wanting one because they are “tired of abuse” and view it as a “last resort” after they have exhausted all other resources they see as being available to them (Fernandez, et. al., 1997; Zoellner, Feeny & Watlington, 2000). Fisher and Rose (1995) found that battered women will seek a PO only after they admit that they are “abused.” In fact, the most recent episode of violence prior to seeking a PO is not typically the most severe, which supports the contention that women who come to the PO process are “sick and tired” of abuse (Zoellner, et al., 2000).

One problem is that this seemingly simple two step process is often drawn out and tends to be a tolling and difficult one for many battered women (Zoellner et al., 2000). One study broke the process down into seven steps, from the original request to the granted final PO and found that only 28.8 percent of those who came in for the initial complaint made it to receiving a final order (Fernandez, et al., 1997). Other studies have returned similar results, finding that the number of women who receive permanent POs is much smaller than the number of those who come to the courts in need of such protection (Harrell & Smith, 1996; Muscat & Iwamoto, 1993).
Unfortunately, for those who do receive the orders they applied for, some research has concluded that protective orders are "generally ineffective in reducing the rate of abuse or violence..." (Grau, Fagan & Wexler, 1985). In Iowa, and other states, this may be at least partially due to inconsistent punishment of violations of the order, due to the fact that the state statutes on enforcement of protective orders include many possible options, all of which are based on "reasonable cause" and therefore much of the decision making is left to the police officers on how they view an individual case (Iowa Judicial Code 236.12, 2003). This is problematic considering that many studies have shown that police officers often do not have enough training in domestic violence situations and often do not understand the dynamics of domestic violence (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Ferraro, 1993; Harris, Dean, Holden & Carlson, 2001; Logan, Shannon & Walker, 2005; Moe, 2006). Therefore, their interpretations of what steps should be taken in terms of enforcement of POs may not always be the best decision for the victim.

Another problem is in the attitudes and behaviors of court personnel, especially those of judges. Ptacek (1999) adapted the typologies created by Mileski (1971) who characterized court personnel based on their demeanor. While Mileski was looking at the nature of the court personnel in their expression of authority toward defendants, both Ptacek (1999) and later, Moe Wan (2000) completed research observing the types of judicial demeanor toward plaintiffs that fit into these categories: good natured, bureaucratic, firm/formal, harsh, and condescending/patronizing. Drawing from Goffman, Ptacek (1999) explains how judges use their demeanor to portray certain images that cause them to be characterized by researchers in such typologies. Some exert
the image of power and control in the way they portray their authority, both verbally and nonverbally, and such behavior that communicates dominance and harshness.

Recent research includes several accounts of court personnel who were characterized as less than helpful in the PO process for battered women (Moe Wan, 2000; Ptacek, 1999). This is unfortunate since Fisher and Rose (1995) found that if the court process is “scary” or “intimidating” to battered women, they will be less likely to complete the process. Researchers have observed judges who acted in intentionally condescending manners toward battered women and characterized this experience as a “revictimization” for the abused. Judges characterized in this manner were often overly authoritative and used language to demonstrate their power over the women (Moe Wan, 2000; Ptacek, 1999). They may at times go so far as to “patronize battered women, trivialize their experiences or openly support their abusers” (Ptacek, 1995, p. 1137-A). They may demonstrate openly sexist mannerisms through blaming victims or even outwardly calling them names (Moe Wan, 2000). Some judges may dismiss charges with the traditional notion that family matters of this nature should stay in the family or are too trivial for the courts to deal with (Ptacek, 1999). Unfortunately, Moe Wan (2000) found that judges often sympathized with abusers, not because they recognize that many abusers come from abusive situations themselves, but apparently just to harass the women. They may downplay the abuse or not even consider it abuse unless what they consider to be serious physical harm can be proven.

Judges are not the only court personnel who at times demonstrate problematic attitudes and behaviors toward women. Police culture may encourage indifference toward victims of domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Ferraro, 1989). For
example, Moe Wan (2000) observed police officers mocking a victim after she collapsed from disorientation and dizziness. Finally, some women may run into uncooperative state attorneys and advocates who want to “assert their superior legal knowledge” on the women (Fischer & Rose, 1995; Moe Wan, 2000, p. 624). From the actions of judges to police officers and lawyers, the legal system clearly has some structural components that tend to disempower women (Ferraro, 1993).

Another problem with the PO process is in terms of bureaucracy. This is especially problematic given that the PO process, and especially advocacy programs, are aimed at making positive social change. However, they now may be more a part, financially, of a bureaucratic governmental system that leads to overworked, underpaid, and often alienated workers (Moe Wan, 2000). The bureaucratic (rushed, detached) treatment of women by victim advocates mentioned in the literature should be addressed with respect to the extremely high case loads with which many of the advocates are working. Additionally, because of their type of work, advocates may suffer “vicarious traumatization” through the women for whom they advocate (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). If it is perceived as an emotional risk for the advocates to become too involved in their cases it may lead to a less caring demeanor (Moe Wan, 2000). Judges are also subjected to the bureaucracy and may take it out on the victims by being “passive toward battered women” and “detached from their situations” (Moe Wan, 2000, p. 619). Although these judges may be somewhat courteous toward the women, they may also act as if they are bored or impatient with them during the proceedings.

For many reasons, women sometimes drop their charges for POs. Kinports and Fischer (1993) found that around half of PO recipients will drop them. Studies maintain
that a PO may actually increase abuse or precede homicide (Hart, 1996; Mahoney, 1991). Mahoney (1991) identifies this separation assault as an attack on women’s autonomy and independence. It puts women attempting a protective order at an increased risk for violence. So, having an opportunity to drop charges is essential to women’s safety and apparently may reduce recidivism amongst batterers (Ford & Regoli, 1992; Hart, 1996). Furthermore, dropping the PO does not necessarily mean that the PO has not served its purpose for the petitioner and satisfied them as such (Fischer & Rose, 1995). Judges, however, tend to hold women responsible for their own abuse should they return to the system multiple times; they seem to not understand that these women may have previously dropped charges because they were forced to or because they did truly believe that their lives or the lives of their children were in danger. Rather, some judges tend to think that the dropped charges occurred because the abuse was not that bad (McGregor & Hopkins, 1991). Women may even be prosecuted for refusing to testify in proceedings against their abusers, making them weary of the courts altogether (Dobash & Dobash, 1992).

Possibly, the most important structural barrier to women is in terms of finances. In fact, access to material resources has been widely established as the key to women’s safety (Coker, 2000; Miller & Krull, 1997; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Dropped charges commonly occur when women are dependent on their abuser’s income (Coker, 2000). This is compounded by the fact that POs require immediate separation which is problematic for women who are financially dependent on their abusers (Coker, 2000; Zoellner, et al., 2000). If the POs do not include financial provisions, the women and their children may not be able to survive without the abusers (Gondolf, McWilliams, Hart
Additionally, laws of certain states prevent judges from expanding on POs to include financial or child custody provisions which could help women in various stages who are trying to get protection and continue to feed their families (Eigenberg, et al., 2003). In other states where law does permit, judges still may not take the time to examine the financial needs of petitioners (Ptacek, 1999). Overall, research has shown that financial PO provisions are usually less than what victims asked for (Gondolf et al., 1994). Clearly, finances are a prevalent theme in the literature as a deterrent to separation.

If women are employed, this may assist them in their ability to follow through with criminal charges and civil POs (Logan, et al., 2005; Moe & Bell, 2004; Muscat & Iwamoto, 1993; Zoellner, et al., 2000). However, petitioners in rural areas tend to be employed less frequently in either full time or part time work than those in urban areas and earn less compared to rural men than urban women do compared to their male counterparts (Logan, et al., 2005; Websdale, 1995). Moreover, battered women in particular have a more difficult time finding and maintaining employment because of complications in their abusive relationships (Moe & Bell, 2004). Recently, practitioners have found success in reducing future violence through the provision of professional training for women leaving domestic violence situations (Websdale & Johnson, 1997). This is a structural approach to addressing the financial needs of women in terms of putting power back into women’s hands.

Although many women do often persist in seeking POs despite increased threats to themselves, when there are threats to their children they will often drop the charges (Zoellner, et al., 2000). If a woman comes to the realization that a PO is simply a piece
of paper and cannot physically keep her abuser away, she may also drop the charges (Fischer & Rose, 1995). However, research indicates that women who come to the PO process often come with long histories of serious abuse (Harrell & Smith, 1996) and that the higher the severity of abuse, the less likely women are to complete the process (Fernandez, et al., 1997). So, unfortunately, the victims who are in the most danger are apparently the least likely to receive assistance in the form of a PO.

Another problem in the PO process highlighted in the literature is the high expectations of petitioners (Moe Wan, 2000). Some women do not respond well to having to explain their lives and intimate details of their abuse to strangers, find the steps of the PO process tedious, and may not understand the process and unintentionally drop charges if they fail to return on court dates (Fernandez, et al., 1997; Moe Wan, 2000). Court personnel expect women to present their cases coherently and rationally without regard to their state of mind. Consequently, because of structural barriers to educational resources, women of lower socioeconomic status may be outwardly treated poorly by personnel or, by virtue of the system, be dismissed from the process because of lack of clarity in their statements or perception of stupidity or unworthiness by court personnel (McGregor & Hopkins, 1991).

Positive Strides in the PO Process: Empowerment and Help Along the Way

Fortunately, there have been several improvements in the PO process. For example, in most states including the state of Iowa where the data were gathered for this project, women no longer have to pay filing fees or need to be married to abusers. However, studies have found that there may be some hidden charges, especially for rural filers, related to serving the order to the abuser (Logan, et al., 2005; Websdale, 1995).
Additionally, the process now does not require petitioners to file for divorce, as was the case in the past for married filers (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Fernandez, et al., 1997). Many states have taken these types of steps as recognition of the structural location of battered women who come to the PO process (Eigenberg, et al., 2003). Another way the process has improved in some states is that women may have access to victim advocates who will assist them in the various steps of the process, beginning with the original draft of the petition through the final hearing (Fernandez, et al., 1997). Advocates may also help victims develop safety plans because of the increased danger they may be in because of the filing of a PO (Hart, 1996; Moe Wan, 2000). Because of improvements to the process and the need for immediate protection, the first several stages, which encompass the initial complaint and the temporary order, may be completed as quickly as 24 hours (Fernandez, et al., 1997). Also, in both rural and urban areas, emergency orders of protection can usually be filed 24 hours a day (Logan, et al., 2005).

In recent years, most states have broadened POs to include provisions about abuse, eviction of abusers from primary residences and some provisions about child custody, finances and other property and have broadened the definition of abuse itself (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Gondolf, et al., 1994). In Iowa, the judge, as a part of the protective order, can order

that the plaintiff, the defendant, and the children...receive professional counseling... that the defendant grant possession of the residence to the plaintiff...that the defendant stay away from the plaintiff’s residence, school, or place or employment...award temporary custody or establish temporary visitation right with regard to children under eighteen...that the defendant pay the clerk a
sum of money for the separate support and maintenance of the plaintiff and children under eighteen...that the defendant pay the plaintiff's attorney's fees and court costs... (Iowa Judicial Code 236.5, 2003, p. 1)

While the attention and cooperation of judges is key to the utility of these available provisions and definitions, progressive states are going far in making the system friendlier for battered women and increasing the efficacy of POs (Logan, et al., 2005).

One of the best outcomes of the PO process is in terms of the emotional empowerment for women (Eigenberg, et al., 2003). Women often feel that the order serves the purpose of proving to everyone, including the various actors in the criminal justice system, that they are serious about ending their abuse (Fisher & Rose, 1995). As one woman said in the Fisher and Rose study “an order of protection [says] ‘I’m not a willing victim’” (p. 422). Hence, the act of obtaining a PO may be an important step in taking control over one’s life. Women may want to communicate to their abusers that they have “had enough” and want their personal space to be safe (Fischer & Rose, 1995). Indeed, in Fisher and Rose’s study, the main motive for obtaining a PO was an attempt at reclaiming what had been taken from them in such a way that they obtained “control over their activities, their bodies, and their lives” (p. 423). Women in this study saw the law as a “force greater then themselves,” one that has more power over the abusers than they do (p. 423). This potentially empowering process may be indicative of a change in roles for the victims and may make them feel like they are not victims anymore. Going through the steps “reflects a determined woman rather then a weak, passive victim” (Fischer & Rose, 1995, p. 421).
Furthermore, researchers have identified positive attitudes and behaviors from various court personnel. Some advocates may go the “extra mile” and prepare battered women for hearings, helping them make notes and counseling them so that they feel mentally prepared for the hearings (Moe Wan, 2000). In terms of judges, those with positive attitudes and helpful behaviors were labeled “good natured judges” by Ptacek (1999) and Moe Wan (2000). Good natured judges warned abusers of the consequences they face should they violate POs as well as warned abusers’ attorneys about overstepping their bounds in cases where they try to confuse or discredit women. Additionally, good natured judges may carefully explain the orders in a way that is easily understood and give referrals to other agencies that could assist with needs not met by the PO (Moe Wan, 2000). They also are known to “conduct hearings in such ways that de-emphasize their authority and help battered women feel welcome and comfortable…” (Moe Wan, 2000, p. 615). Good natured judges express their admiration to the women for having the courage to complete the PO process. Ptacek (1999) and Moe Wan (2000) both describe the good-natured demeanor of judges as involving care, courtesy and good listening skills; they often ask questions aimed at getting to the truth behind a given situation and work to extend the power of the judicial system to the victim. Good-natured judges are often especially concerned about getting women the resources they need, emphasizing that abuse is, in fact, illegal and encouraging women to seek other criminal justice solutions for their abuse.

Research has found positive attitudes and treatment of domestic violence victims by police as well (Apsler, Cummins & Carl, 2003; Zoellner, et al., 2000). Although these results are not as common in the literature as poor treatment from police, it is important
to note that some police act with sympathy and professional courtesy to victims of domestic violence and that this is important in meeting victims' needs (Apsler, et al., 2003; Moe, 2006). Even small courtesies such as giving them pamphlets on their criminal justice system options can be important to the empowerment of victims in the PO process (Coker, 2000). Police can also act in ways that show their support of victims during court proceedings for PO hearings (Fisher & Rose, 1995). These actions are symbolically relevant. Making court a “safe place,” psychologically and physically, for battered women and demonstrating to the abuser that the woman has power through the resources she has gained is important in emphasizing that abuse is not acceptable in the eyes of the law.
METHODS

*Why Qualitative?*

I selected a qualitative interview design for the data collection for this research project. Qualitative data collection is most appropriate for this type of study because I am looking for depth of information rather than having an interest in quantifying women’s experiences. It is the most appropriate way to answer my research questions because I want to explore and understand the intricacies in the protective order process from their point of view. I want to know whether the process for these particular women is empowering and living up to its position as one of the most common legal responses to domestic violence. Since the PO process is deferred to so much, it is important to know, from victims’ perspectives, what factors may assist or deter its completion and whether it was useful for them in achieving their goals.

The intent of qualitative research is “to understand a particular situation, event, role, group, or interaction” (Creswell, 2003, p. 198). A goal of this research is to take a marginalized group, domestic violence victims, out of the invisibility of mainstream society and bring them to the center of this research, keeping in mind and being sensitive to groups that may be marginalized even within the population of domestic violence victims. It is important in qualitative research not to approach the research with a clearly defined hypothesis, rather, to look at it as an investigation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, my goal in this research was to learn from victims, to understand and value their individual experiences. A long term goal of this project and other research of this nature is to use emergent themes from the perspectives gained through interviews to make policy recommendations and raise awareness about the PO process. The project
offers new, unique voices and the often overlooked perspective of women from rural areas.

In order to answer my questions and investigate the PO process, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with victims of domestic violence that lasted between 30 and 120 minutes (the average being about 50 minutes) regarding their experiences in attempting to attain POs and the efficacy of the obtained orders for them. I tried to approach each interview assuming that each woman had an expert voice worth hearing and considering. By relying on a semi-structured guide, this project provided a space for researcher/respondent dialogue in that participants were able to go beyond questions on a sheet and I was able to ask additional questions based on previous responses (Ullman, 2005). As a new researcher to the qualitative process, this research project provided many learning opportunities for me. I reflected on these in a paper for the “Doing Feminist Research” panel and the Midwest Society for Sociology meetings in 2006. This paper is included as Appendix D at the end of this thesis.

These experiences of marginalized groups such as battered women are important in order to understand how they are affected by and how they act within structure. So, while the notes and observations of court personnel, lawmakers and researchers are useful, the experiences presented in this thesis of individual women as they attempt to navigate the PO process are the key to making practical improvements in the PO process for petitioners. This type of discourse has been labeled “survivor speech” (Alcoff & Gray, 1993). Alcoff and Gray (1993) posed that researchers “... need to transform arrangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorized to be both witnesses and experts, both reporters of experience and the theorists of experience...” (p.
The key to this progressive survivor speech as an empowering tool for these victims and survivors of domestic violence, then, will be their role in the conversation as the "expert." They will be seen as experts who are intelligent and capable enough to be relied upon to make their own interpretations of their experiences within the conversation. In this way, I will avoid taking power away from them by interpreting their experiences for them and promoting my own interpretations.

The Process

The process of subject recruiting was based on the participation of the Domestic/Sexual Assault Outreach Center (DSAOC) in Fort Dodge, Iowa. This agency agreed to assist in this research and help in any way they could. I have visited the shelter on several occasions and built a relationship with the director. She agreed to ask shelter workers, including advocates and counselors, to solicit participation from clients they encountered who had sought a PO in response to a violent intimate partner. When a client was interested, she was given the information sheet (Appendix B) with my phone number (as well as access to a phone when appropriate) so that we could discuss the project further and possibly arrange for an appointment. In all, 17 interviews were conducted over a two-week period in December of 2005. Throughout the interview process, I was attempting to gradually bring together pieces of women's experiences in order to understand their collective as well as individual lives and needs (Creswell, 2003). Attention was paid to details, particular feelings and perspectives. In addition, I kept a journal along the way, tracking my observations, feelings, insights, and intuition. In this way, I was not pretending to be detached from the data, but rather intimately connected, if not, a part of it. In this way, I was able to gain an understanding of
women's lives from their perspectives. Rather than seeing the informants as social
dummies, having no agency and caught up in a system of pure circumstance, I tried to
respect their complex backgrounds and expertise of experience.

Issues of Objectivity and Validity

As with other qualitative designs, I, the researcher, was the instrument of data
collection (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, objectivity is an issue worth considering.
Qualitative researchers stress the importance of denying positivist notions that the
researcher must be value-free, without biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, Snow,
Anderson & Lofland, 2006). In contrast, qualitative research seeks objectivity in a
different sense of the word where the researcher "seeks believability...insight and
instrumental utility and trustworthiness through a process of verification" (Creswell,
2003, p. 199). This differs from traditional checks of reliability and validity (Creswell,
2003). It is a different way of attempting to find truths where intersubjectivity is valued.
I sought to find commonalities of experience in women's perceptions of reality. Through
my dialogue with women, I was attempting to understand their realities and keep such
realities at the center of this project.

As an important methodological procedure, I also engaged in internal validity
checks. During the time of data collection, I carried out "member checking" whereby I
kept continual dialogue with women during the interviews so that I could check my
interpretations and be careful that I was correctly interpreting their perceptions of their
experiences (Creswell, 2003). Ullman (2005) labels this process "collaborative dialogue"
and places it at the forefront of important methodological procedures for qualitative
researchers (p. 1128). Additionally, as suggested by other qualitative researchers, I
engaged in peer examination as I navigated the process (Ullman, 2005). I checked and verified my assumptions, conclusions and procedures with a practiced qualitative researcher with whom I was in contact during the time of data collection. Finally, I constantly clarified my own positions and kept my researcher biases in check as I continually considered my own feelings and assumptions and how they may have been affecting the research process.

*Role of the Researcher*

As previously mentioned, as the researcher, I was the instrument of data collection. Qualitative design is based on the notion that the researcher's personal and research self are inseparable (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I did not hide my agenda of making positive social change. My interpretation of the data is based on my values and shaped by my experiences. One cannot escape this element of personal interpretation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, et al., 2006). As a student of feminist criminology, I regard the women who are the subjects in this research as experts of their own lives and as people rather than as subjects.

Understanding my own experiences is important to the foundation of the methodological design of this project. Feminist standpoint epistemology demands honesty from researchers and a disclosure of the motivations and values that guide any particular investigation (Harding, 1991). I have an interest in social justice and will not pretend that I have no biases or intentions coming into this research. Although I have no personal experience of terror from being in a physically violent relationship, I see myself as not very different from these women in a number of ways. As a woman, I am affected by the biases and stereotypes embedded in our societal structures. These caused me to
come to the conclusion that there were problematic societal structures regarding gender at the young age of twelve when I reflected on my mother's experiences as a single mother, attempting to provide financially and navigate the social circles of rural, bible belt America. While I did not identify or name that experience at the time, I can see, to some degree, the effects of being part of a marginalized group. My values include the necessity to not ignore marginalized groups, rather, to bring them to the center of the analysis.

Considering myself a Christian and growing up in the Christian tradition, as many women do in the region of Iowa where the data will be collected, I identify with the pressure felt by many of these women to remain with their intimate partners no matter what. Because I do identify myself as a Christian, I also take issue with and am admittedly skeptical of the traditional criticism of Christianity (in the United States) of blaming the male, as the head of the household, for the state of women in our society. As a part of the bias I bring to this research, it is my belief that the state of women is partially due to a vast misinterpretation of the biblical teachings on women's roles and the forming of Christian tradition and church structures accordingly. However, I believe this bias will only enhance my empathy and understanding of these women's experiences. I will be quite aware of the problematic traditional male/female power structures, as they concern me greatly.

Reporting of Results/Interpretation of Data/Analysis

In accordance with the standards for qualitative data collection procedures, the analysis is a constant process done simultaneously with data collection (Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Ullman, 2005). I took notes after each interview and at the
end of each day of interviewing. The final resulting data are reported descriptively, using words rather than charts or graphs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Taking the advice of Ullman (2005) and Lane (1996), I did transcribe most of the interviews myself. The ones that I did not, I listened to as I read through the transcript for the first time, changing punctuations and correcting any interpretative errors. I did this in order to ensure that they were transcribed as accurately as possible, so as to maintain the integrity of the interviews and to learn about and appreciate the process as a new researcher. I took notes during the transcription or initial listening to the tape, which I labeled, ‘initial reactions’ and which were foundational in analyzing this data. These initial notes were what brought forth themes and evolved into the results section of this thesis.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure high ethical standards for this research project, I did engage in a number of procedural checks. The participants had every opportunity to decline to participate in the interview and were not be pressured into participation for any reason. Interviews were conducted at the familiar location of DSAOC in Fort Dodge, Iowa (the main shelter) and other branch offices the shelter maintains in other, more rural areas (all locations are unknown from the general public). These were familiar locations for the participants, as all were solicited for participation from those involved in the services provided by this shelter. Child care was provided during the interviews as necessary. Transportation was also considered and provided, as necessary, on an individual basis by the shelter staff. To ensure safety, the location of the shelter is not known to the general population. Finally, arrangements were made with DSAOC for resources to be available to women, such as a support group and counseling information pamphlets, should they
choose to utilize them. A list of resources in the area outside of the shelter was also available to each participant.

The interests (i.e., privacy, emotional and physical well-being) of the respondents were always held in highest regard during the actual interviews as well. First, I made my research objective, my agenda and how the data could be used clear to the informants at the outset of each interview. In order to build rapport with the women, I engaged in a discussion of my interests to lower tension and build trust through dialogue before they gave any personal information. This way, each woman was made fully aware of how the data might be used. This initial conversation was always quite useful in breaking the ice and showing the clients who I was and what I was interested in. They each received remuneration in the amount of 15 dollars for their time and participation in the interview, even if they were to decide to end it early, which none did. I applied to the Kercher Center for Social Research at Western Michigan University for the stipend funds and received 500 dollars to partially cover the expenses of this project.

At the outset of each interview, I made the informants aware of my recording devices, including an audio recorder as well as a notebook on which I made handwritten notes. These handwritten notes were not a source of data collection. Rather, they were used to remind myself of prompts (based on what she was saying) to use later in the interview as not to interrupt a current topic. As is the policy laid out in my Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) protocol from Western Michigan University, each woman had the opportunity to give informed consent to participate in the interview. I received a waiver from HSIRB for signed informed consent, instead, recording verbal consent at the outset of the audio-recorded interview. I used
pseudonyms for the women to ensure confidentiality. Each participant had the
effort to choose her pseudonym and has knowledge of it so that she can contact me
in order to receive a copy of her transcript if she chooses to do so. I will also make my
final thesis available to the women who participated in this study if they request it. Most
importantly, I always tried to keep the participants’ interests at the center of my decision
making regarding data collection, reporting, and use thereof.

*Weaknesses of the Design*

One weakness in terms of validity is that there was no triangulation available
within this study since only one method of data collection was used. Therefore, my
conclusions from the interview data are not able to be checked against other types of data.
Rather, I checked the data and my findings against the existing body of literature for
consistencies and inconsistencies. Within the process, I attempted to draw together the
previous literature and the results of this study in order to make comparisons and see how
this sample may be similar and different from previous studies. These are reported
within the findings. I also utilized the knowledge of more experienced qualitative
researchers in order to maintain high methodological standards for this project.

Another weakness of this study is that the findings will not be generalizable to a
larger population. There is much debate about generalizability and how researchers
should go about collecting data and interpreting findings. Conventional methods teach
that the researcher is supposed to be an objective party and that the goal of collecting data
is to derive laws from statistical inference that are applicable to a larger population
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, et al., 2006). The researcher, then, is an objective tool
who collects the data in the most unbiased way possible. However, in regard to field
studies, Lofland, et al., said that, "So-called objectivity and distance vis-à-vis the field setting will usually result in a failure to collect much data that are worth analyzing."

(Lofland, et al., 2006, p. 16). Recently, researchers have brought attention to this more "naturalistic" field research, where generalization is based on the personal experience of the researcher (Kvale, 1996). In this approach, the researcher starts from where he or she is at and avoids putting the constraints of detailed hypotheses and other presuppositions on the process. This type of data collection and analysis offers theoretical transferability and deeper understandings of social phenomena rather than generalizable findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Johnson, 1997).

However, my study does contain theoretical transferability in that it may test, refine or extend theoretical models of various phenomena (Lofland, et al., 2006). By asking questions that demonstrate how social actors are navigating and therefore reconstructing their social circumstances, I can shed light on various common conceptualizations of the social world. Lofland, et al. (2006) call this process a "de-objectification" and claim that "...focusing agency or strategy is one way to 'deobjectify' social arrangements" (p. 166). They say that, "...in de-objectification we come to realize that no social arrangement simply (is). Rather, arrangements are incessantly constituted and reconstituted" (Lofland, et al., 2006, p. 167). This is at the heart of structured action. I looked at how these women navigated their social circumstances and recreated structures accordingly.

Like many others who do these types of studies, I obtained a non-probability, convenience sample of women in contact with a shelter. This left open the possibility of sampling bias, as my findings are based exclusively on women who are utilizing shelter
services and who were selected for possible participation by the shelter workers. Some women may not have known about the shelter's services, may have had language barriers preventing them from using the shelter or may not have felt that it was safe to seek help. Also, those who attempted to seek help in the past in various ways, including in the PO process, and had bad experiences may be unlikely to trust services such as the shelter and thus would have been less likely to be a part of this sample.
FINDINGS

Analysis Procedure

According to Kvale (1996), “the most frequent form of interview analysis is probably an ad hoc use of different approaches and techniques for meaning generation.” (p. 203). Accordingly, I have used a combination of meaning condensation, meaning categorization, meaning interpretation and narrative structuring in order to find and present themes that emerged from this interview process. In order to analyze this data, I first listened to each tape, noting themes in each conversation. During this process, I kept a separate document of thoughts regarding the conversation. This was an incredibly useful step in preserving the interview as a conversation rather than a paper transcript. It was from this set of notes that most of the major thematic elements arose. I then referenced the field notes I took just after each interview to check my initial reactions. Although I had originally planned to transcribe all of the interviews myself, this process would have been preventative of completing this project in a reasonable amount of time so I had a professional transcriptionist complete the last several tapes. I did find it useful to do several of the tapes myself, though, as to more fully understand what transcription entails.

In reporting my findings, there are both elements that I considered “thematic” as well as those that I considered “noteworthy.” In order for something to qualify as “thematic,” it had to come up in at least half of the interviews. Other things, while not thematic, were considered “noteworthy.” These were events or feelings expressed by the women that while perhaps significant in terms of existing literature, did not appear frequently enough to merit a thematic designation.
It is also important to note that while my findings are for the most part derived from my experiences in the interviews, I also had the chance to observe some of the activities at the shelter that helped to put the interviews into context. These included staff interactions, house meetings, social events, client intakes, and informal counseling sessions. These observations helped to frame my experiences in the interviews.

In reporting the results, I use quotes from the interviews as examples of my points. In some cases, their exact words would be enough for someone reading to identify them so I often replaced their specific words with more general words, which I put in brackets. I did this in such a way that the meanings of what the women said were not changed, but their identities were protected.

**Characteristics of the Participants, the Shelter Staff and DSAOC**

The women in this sample ranged in age from 25 to 55. The majority of them were in their late thirties to early forties. Of the 17 who participated, 15 identified as Caucasian while one identified herself as American Indian and one identified as African American. All but one reported completing high school or having a GED. Most had completed at least some college and four had an associate’s degree or higher. DSAOC is located in the largest town that it serves, Fort Dodge, Iowa which has a population of around 25,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). While six of the participants lived and applied for their POs in Fort Dodge, 11 had applied in outlying areas, all of which are much more rural than Fort Dodge. The majority of the women I interviewed had an active PO, while others had POs that had been dropped or denied. Some women were in between a temporary and permanent order or were in hiding while they were waiting for
the temporary order to be served. They all had at least one child; many had two or more. Most of them shared at least one child with their abusers.

The shelter staff was diverse in many ways. Many were survivors of domestic and/or sexual assault themselves and there always seems to be a certain feeling in the air at the shelter, an attitude of victim support and operational unity. There were posters about survival and in support of victims on the walls and the staff participated with the shelter clients in various activities. While some of the staff seemed to be the extremely professional, clean-cut types, others were very informal and "rough." Coming from varying walks of life, some used professional and legal terminology while others were straight to the point and did not mind being more informal, including cursing and other casual linguistic nuances. I judged this to be a positive aspect of the shelter, as different victims respond to various personalities of service providers. While they demonstrated these varying characteristics, they were all united in purpose.

Also, the staff was incredibly cooperative and helpful to me with this project. While they were extremely busy with heavy case loads and at the time of my research, they were in preparation of a large community event they organize around Christmas time every year, at least five of the advocates/counselors including (and especially) the director were extremely active in helping me find possible participants. They would let me use their offices for interviews when necessary and seemed interested in what I was doing. DSAOC does provide beds and in-house living assistance for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Most of the women I interviewed had utilized these services at one time or another although only a handful of them were staying in the shelter at the time I interviewed them. The shelter workers solicited most of the participants from the
continued counseling, advocacy and support group services they were receiving at the
time of data collection.

The General PO Process for this Sample

Protective orders seemed to be, as is typical of many areas, common in rural
Iowa. In asking the women in my sample where they had heard about POs, most of them
had heard about them from the shelter workers although a few had heard about them from
the police or reported to have "just known" that they existed. Affirming the literature,
most women in this sample reported being tired of enduring abuse and sought POs after
seeking other options they originally thought viable such as calling police or going to
family for help (Fernandez, et al., 1997). Most women in this sample, however, did
describe coming to the PO process after an event that went beyond their previous abuse
tolerances.

While literature has drawn out a difficult process in some areas, almost all of the
women in this sample reported a quick and easy process in obtaining their protective
orders. This finding also corroborates a previous study by Adhikari, Reinhard and
Johnson (1993), finding, despite difficulties reported by other researchers, that high
percentages of women did not report having any problems receiving the PO. The
problem more highly reported was the extremely draining process involved in filing
violations of the order, which was so problematic to some women that they deemed the
entire PO process useless. Another typical complaint drawn out in previous research is
that a small number of women who attempt a PO make it to receiving final orders
(Fernandez, et al., 1997). The method of sampling on this project makes it difficult to
comment on this as women who had bad experiences and did not receive POs may not
have been as available for counseling and other services and activities within the organization from which participants were chosen. However, as previously mentioned, the ones with whom I spoke reported ease of PO process navigation.

Recently, there have been several improvements in the protective order process in Iowa and other states. Although most of these women did not have the comparison of having applied for POs before and after the changes, a few of them did and reflected positively on how the changes made their lives easier. Only one reported having any cost to filing, which is definitely a positive change as most of the women I interviewed said that they would have been unlikely to complete the process had it cost them money. Additionally, the expedited process now available with the temporary order allowed all of women who received orders to receive their initial temporary orders the same day they applied for them.

Although each case varied slightly, the common process for the women in this sample began at DSAOC. The advocate would help them fill out a temporary order if it was during the day or emergency order if it was a night or weekend. Then, the shelter advocate would go with the petitioner to the courthouse (many times in a different city since the shelter is in Fort Dodge) to file the temporary order in the county courthouse where the victim resided. The temporary order application asks the victim various questions regarding the incidents of abuse including dates and injuries incurred. In every case, the temporary order was granted immediately although they are not technically effective until they are served to the defendant.

Someone from the sheriff’s office usually served the temporary order right away (within a few hours). This was typically not a problem since the abuser’s friends, family,
place(s) of employment and place(s) of leisure were usually known to the petitioner as well as the police. According to Iowa statute 236.4, the hearing for the permanent order is to occur between five and 15 days of the temporary order (Iowa Judicial Code 236.4, 2003) and in the typical case in this sample, the permanent order hearing would occur about two weeks later. A few had problems receiving the permanent order, especially in the cases where the abuser had a lawyer and the petitioner did not. In cases where the "permanent" order was granted, unless the judge specified a different time period, the order was typically valid for one year. After that time, the petitioner would need to file for an extension.

The court process varied for each victim but there are some general characteristics that are useful for understanding this sample. While my questions were directed toward the civil POs filed by the victims, many of these women had criminal POs as well and the stories of the two orders were laced together. Criminal orders in Iowa are referred to as "no contact orders." These no contact orders are issued in criminal court by a judge while civil POs are issued by a judge in a civil proceeding. There were various judges who heard the civil PO cases and they varied by county. During the PO hearing, the judge would sometimes address some of the women’s pragmatic needs through the provisional additions available on civil protective orders involving possession of the residence and temporary custody of children.

With regard to those who attended court with them and assisted them, only one woman had an attorney for the initial filing of the PO (although a few had lawyers when they were trying to process violations) and this was because she was filing for divorce simultaneously. However, all but one of the petitioners reported having an advocate from
DSAOC present during the hearing who often gave them a ride to the courthouse.

Indicative of changes to the PO process, no one reported direct costs involved with the filing or service of the orders, although they did often report indirect costs such as loss of work time or daycare costs. While the process of obtaining a temporary, then a final order seems straightforward on paper, there were various nuances to the process as well as problems and obstacles of various kinds reported.

_The Role of the Protective Order in Achieving One's Goals_

One of the research questions guiding this project was, “What role do victims see the PO process playing in their effort to achieve the goals for which they came to receive a PO?” Several themes emerged with regard to this question. First, though, in order to frame this discussion, I will start by addressing themes related to what the victims stated were their goals and motivations in coming to the PO process (their goals are the foundation for evaluating the efficacy of the PO). Then, I will move on to the major themes of what they felt the PO process did for them, including the helpfulness of those involved and the efficacy of the obtained orders. Four main goals/motivations emerged: children, safety, space and permanent escape from the relationship.

Commonly, women reported that they wanted and expected safety from the protective order. While it was usually an incident of violence that brought them to the process, it was not typically the most severe. This corroborates similar findings made by other researchers who concluded that this pattern shows that women who file POs are “sick and tired” of abuse (Fernandez, et al., 1997; Zoellner, et al., 2000). More often than not, before reflecting on other hopes they had for the PO, many women would state plainly that they were tired of enduring abuse and wanted safety both for themselves and
their children. This seemed to be the standard answer before women went on to explain other things. This may be because the shelter from which the participants were chosen emphasizes safety throughout their services— the women who utilize their services are then more likely to identify wanting safety for themselves and their children first and foremost. Moreover, the very purpose of the protective order, as stated in Iowa law, is to provide safety for people from domestic violence (Iowa Judicial Code 236.5, 2003).

Beyond safety for themselves, children were the most commonly cited reason for coming to the protective order process. Even those who did not cite them as their primary reason reflected on their hope for safety or a different life for their children at some point during the interview. The most emotional responses came when women were discussing their children. These women usually put the safety of their children above their own and a few cited coming to the protective order process solely because they wanted safety for their children. Even if the PO did not accomplish all that they hoped for with regard to their personal safety, some women still reflected on it positively because it helped with their children. Kathryn spoke of this in saying that,

    The only thing that the protective order has ever accomplished for me is...it allowed me to keep my children at home...[I could] keep them with me, you know, pretty safe, cause...he...didn’t want kidnapping charges...he even told me that. So he didn’t even niess with the issues with the kids...

Although this woman had been hoping for safety for herself and did not receive it from the protective order, she had considered it a useful process in that she felt that it had kept her abuser from taking her kids. This statement also indirectly speaks to the efficacy of
the provisions now available in this civil process as she was granted custody during of the
PO proceeding.

Other women reported simply wanting space for themselves. They wanted time
away from their abusers to evaluate their lives so that they could move forward with a
better perspective. Kathryn spoke of this in expressing that, "I actually had hoped for
some space and some time and um...to try to hold him accountable and let him know that
I didn’t want things to continue the way they were. Kinda like get his attention."
Kathryn, and others, did not want to leave their abusers at that time. Rather, they sought
temporary orders in order to get some time and space away from their abusers in order to
try and promote changes of various kinds in their relationships with their abusers. They
saw the PO as a chance get his attention or simply to be away from his influence for a
time. This confirms Fisher and Rose’s (1995) findings that women may not necessarily
be hoping for permanent separation from their abusers when they come to the PO process
and may therefore find their needs fulfilled even though they choose to drop the order.

Finally, some women reported wanting to leave their abusers permanently and
saw the PO as the first step in doing that. As is typical of domestic violence victims
(Fernandez, et al. 1997), many of these women reported going through the process
several times. If they were further removed from the relationship (and the PO process)
and there was a “last” time that they had filed, it was usually that “last” time that they
reported wanting to permanently end the relationship. They often reflected on previous
times that they had filed and expressed feelings of not being ready to end the relationship
on those occasions, thinking that their abusers could “get better.” So, most of these
women who wanted a permanent end to their relationships were, at one time, women who
wanted safety for themselves, space, or safety for their children. Shelley reflected on her feelings in filing for previous orders and said that, "...that first one, I didn't like it...this one...[I like]...I think it's cause I was ready. A woman has to be ready to actually want it." Shelley had a different perspective now, having been through the PO process numerous times. These varying hopes confirm previous literature that suggests that differing perceptions and experiences, including where one is at in the PO process or how much time has elapsed since the order was granted will affect the perceived outcome and efficacy of the PO from the victim's perspective (Johnson, Luna & Stein, 2003).

Specific Problems in the Protective Order Process

Many women reflected on specific kinks in the protective order process, such as paperwork and language on the final order that they felt were major obstacles to achieving their goals. While literature in this area has reflected extensively on the tediousness of the process of obtaining the actual protective order, surprisingly few women in this population had a hard time receiving their initial, temporary orders, or their semi-permanent final orders. This may be largely due to the fact that the women I interviewed were all clients of the shelter and therefore had access to counselors and advocates who helped them with the filing of the orders. However, even the ones who applied without the assistance of the shelter workers reported ease of system navigation. This may also be due to changes that the state of Iowa has made to protective orders which have eliminated costs for filers, expedited the temporary order process and allowed for the inclusion of provisions such as financial assistance, child custody and residential arrangements.
The most well documented barrier to women leaving domestic violence situations involves financial barriers (Coker, 2000; Miller & Krull, 1997; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Indeed, the women in this study reported not having the ability to pursue independence due to being financially dependent on their abusers. While the provisionary changes can be positive and helpful in this way, often what looked good on paper did not always work out in the real world for these women, especially regarding financial obstacles. The abusers did not always comply with the financial and residential provisions demanded in the protective order, leaving the women without resources. Many women reflected on this, facing the hard reality that they had to abandon all of their belongings and their source of income, their abuser. These are hard things to relinquish and the nature of protective orders is so final that many had a difficult time letting go. For example, Bethany, who was having a especially difficult time with finances reflected on her needs in saying that,

There is a problem with that [restraining order] because...everything goes under his name. I mean from bank accounts to whatever. [With] the restraining order on him, then, you know, I was left with the kids, no money whatsoever...I mean, [the restraining order] is definitely good, you know...except for that, when this happens, you are put in a heck of a situation all of a sudden, but, you know, there is just no other way...your safety comes first...

Bethany, and others, had dropped prior orders due to finances, corroborating previous results that observed similar behaviors (Coker, 2000). Mahogany reflected similarly in saying that, “I lost my car, my home, everything...I had to walk away from
everything...” This was a common complaint of the women as a testament to the far reaching and echoing effects of domestic violence.

Contributing to financial barriers, battered women often seem to have a hard time finding and maintaining employment (Moe & Bell, 2004). Many of the women in this sample had problems getting jobs because their lives had been so chaotic that they did not have good references from previous jobs. This corroborates the findings of Moe and Bell (2004) who studied the negative impacts of domestic violence on victims’ employability. However, in the few instances when the women in this sample were employed, their employers seemed to be extremely accommodating, allowing as much time off as they needed and often, providing conference rooms for the women to use when meeting with lawyers and advocates. This was typically because the abusers had caused so many problems for the work environment that the employers were happy to accommodate the exiting of the abusers from their lives.

Another thematic problem involved the amount of paperwork required in the PO process. Although none were deterred from pursuing the PO as a result, at least half of the women complained about the paperwork. Many found the questions redundant as well as the details requested to be impossible to recount. I cannot state the case any better than Verna, who said,

They asked a lot of questions in different ways that meant the same thing...I was writing the same thing over and over and over again...like...one question on there that they asked...wanted a date and time, the dates and time of the physical confrontations and it was like, I can’t remember that! I mean, I can remember...a couple of the most recent ones but...I was with him for three years...I wasn’t
planning on being at this point in my life two years later, so I didn’t document it at that time.

As many of the women had similar complaints, we would often look through the paperwork together and they would recall their experiences and feelings in filling out the tedious questions that often did demand details that would be strenuous to remember, as well as emotionally draining. As one woman, Laura, said,

…It’s embarrassing because they want the details, and not to cheat yourself, you want to give them the details [but] you have to try to keep everything in order, you try and keep [track of] all the dates of when things happened…

Fortunately, because of my unique sample, the women with whom I spoke typically had counselors or advocates working with them in filling out the paperwork in the safe environment of the shelter. They encouraged them as they were recounting all the incidents and helped them to organize their thoughts and express them appropriately so as to increase the likelihood that their temporary orders would be granted.

There was one central theme that although I did not set out looking for, came to surface in at least half of the interviews. This was the issue of PO enforcement, or the lack thereof. Even though they had active POs, several of the women in this sample found safety from their abusers only in that often these men often found their way to jail on other offenses. Many of the women spoke of feeling safe now, but only because the “real” jail time came for other, “real” offenses such as drunk driving or theft. This brings up an important point both for these women as well as the women for whom this false stereotype that all batterers are criminals is not true. What about the abusers who are not
offenders in other ways? Are the repercussions for the crime of domestic assault and breaking of a civil or a criminal protective order not as serious as drunk driving?

Another problem with the PO process involved reporting violations. Nearly all of the women took issue with this aspect of the PO process. Since the restraining order is such a commonly deferred to legal response to domestic violence, one would hope that the contingency would carry to violations of those orders. Patti was highly frustrated with this aspect of protective orders and said that,

We have been to court eight times for violation of the [protective order]. And I will be honest with you, I could probably file at least that many times every day because still, he is being a problem. Still he calls and calls and calls. Still he’s beating on my door. He’s following me to work. I mean he is stalking me...but, you have to keep going back to court and you have to keep having money and you have to...face him every time in the court room. And it takes so long from filing the charges to getting to court. So much time is in between...its is not necessarily that you don’t want to see something done, it is that you get so frustrated with waiting for something to get done and then you start to doubt yourself...

Many women responded similarly when asked about filing violations to their protective orders. One woman named Kathryn, who had an active PO, made a comment that was well representative of many of the others’ complaints when she said about filing violations that,

It’s a lengthy process... you go in there an you have to sit in front of the judge and...tell what is going on in your life with him violating the order. And if I technically reported every time he violated the restraining order, I mean, I could
probably document 5,000 times. You know, I mean, that’s a little exaggeration, but you know what I mean... One time in 12 hours... he had called me 50 times... I called the police... they said that we’ve already been out there and... filed one time. [The police] said, ‘you just keep track of all the times he’s called you and you can deal with that in court.’

In many cases, having the PO filed was not keeping these abusers away and the criminal justice system was not responding to the degree that the women had hoped.

An important finding of this research is the need for improvement in the consequences for breaking protective orders, as well as increased criminal consequences for the crime of domestic violence in the first place. We should not be deferring to the civil and family courts to be controlling these offenses. It seems ridiculous to think of such a policy in regard to any other crimes. If I robbed a bank, the police would not tell them to get a sheet of paper asking me to refrain from robbing them in the future. The problem, of course, is that domestic violence, it is claimed, is so hard to prove and in a criminal proceeding, the burden of proof lies on the state to show that a crime has been committed beyond a reasonable doubt. However, a lack of ease for producing results is not logically a good reason to stop such an important initiative as this. Additionally, I do not necessarily buy this excuse in the first place since there are always neighbors and children who can attest to what they heard as well as shelter and hospital workers willing to testify to what bruises or other wounds they observed on the victims. It makes sense to rely on the civil system to an extent in order to assist in domestic violence cases, but I take issue with the fact that we rely on it so heavily as a common response to domestic violence. However, civil protective orders are commonly accepted as a positive step in
state legislation that benefits women in ways that criminal proceedings can not (Hart, 1996; Wallace, 1996). They are typically less cumbersome than criminal proceedings, and may provide provisions related to financial and child custody arrangements. So, while they are a good alternative or supplement to criminal prosecution of domestic violence, I do not conclude that they were effective enough to be relied upon as the primary response to DV for these women.

One kink in the protective order that seemed to go untouched by law enforcement or the courts in the cases of the women I talked to was third party violations. Even though the permanent protective order in Iowa clearly states that, “The defendant shall not communicate with the protected party in person or through any means including third persons…” (Iowa Judicial Code 236.4, Form 4.1). These women commonly reported that they were being stalked and harassed by third parties. One woman, Merin, was distressed by the lengths her abuser had gone to when,

His girlfriend was harassing me. His mom, sisters, they were harassing me for him… I had called the police… and told them, because on the protection order, they cannot do third party… that is breaking the protection order… and they [still] did that several times… you know, his mom called and screamed and swore at me, so horribly… [his mom and sisters] would always call me and harass me before a trial and after a trial, no matter what. And is just seemed like, you know, they broke the protection order but nothing ever happened.

Stories like this were common and I never heard a case where a third party violation was punished.
A few women mentioned problems with getting extensions of the orders. Since they only last a year, women have to reapply each year and give a reason why they think the order needs to be extended. Laura reflected on the irony of this situation in saying that,

I have to find a reason every year, a new abuse, anything new, any threats, anything to get me that order for the year so if its working...then it gets turned down...Some perpetrators, they can wait a long time too. Once that PO is dropped then its safe to say they’re gonna come after you.

Iowa law regarding extensions of the PO states that an extension can be filed “...if the court finds that the defendant continues to pose a threat to the safety of the victim...” (Iowa Judicial code 236.14, 2003, p. 1). Thus, the system assumes that the orders will be violated (although there did not seem to be much follow through for violations reported by women in this area). If the order is working, and the abuser is no longer threatening the victim of violating the order, then it will eventually expire.

Another problem mentioned in several of the interviews was due to the fact that the civil protective order is not active until it is served to the respondent. Sometimes it would take days to complete this and victims were forced to continually ‘look over their shoulder’ and wonder whether their abusers had received the order and whether they were going to abide by it. Overall, it is clear that while progress has been made to better accommodate the specific needs of victims of domestic violence, that there are still ways in which the process could be changed to better ensure victims’ safety. Some barriers to filing, like fear, may never go away. However, other barriers related to specific kinks in
the process leave room for immediate improvement through education and political reform.

*Emotional and Psychological Barriers in the Protective Order Process*

The most common obstacle in the PO process was one’s own emotional and psychological barriers to coming to the process and going through all of the steps it takes in order to obtain and maintain a “permanent” protective order. Indeed, fear was the most the most common complaint of the women in this sample. I could often hear the fear in women’s voices as they reflected on the PO process. Filing for the PO was often seen as an outward, strong and confrontational step in the relationship. As one woman named Laura reflected, “There’s a lot of fear cause you’re going face to face with someone that you loved, trusted, believed in and stood by...And they beat you to a pulp.” This quote also reflects on something that is often forgotten by many people when domestic violence is discussed and encountered, that these women love these men. They have been in committed relationships with them and trusted them. Often, they have children together and going through the PO process was seen as something very final, an end to the relationship. Another woman, Jessica, discussed this very issue when asked about barriers to taking this step. She said, “I always wanted to say the reason I’m still in this relationship [is] cause somewhere in the bottom of my heart, I love this jerk, I have not a clue why, other than he’s the baby’s father...” Like Jessica, many of the women in this sample had been with their abusers for many years, usually three years or more. They often had many happy years before the abuse began and filing for a protective order was extremely emotionally draining.
More than anywhere else, fear was an emotional barrier in court. The PO process requires the petitioner and the respondent to be present at the court hearing for the permanent PO. Almost all of the women in this sample mentioned having some apprehension in approaching this courtroom appearance. Having to face someone and talk out loud in such a way that, in many cases, was hidden and forbidden to speak of for years, was scary for many of these women, prohibitively so in some cases. Staci spoke well of this in saying that,

[The judge] asked me questions and...my boyfriend was there...and he’s really intimidating...[my boyfriend] started being verbally abusive and I got a little scared...the judge kept asking me if I want a permanent [order] and I wouldn’t answer him because I really didn’t know what to say, you know...

In this case, Staci ended up, under threat from her boyfriend, having the order dropped and was still living in fear when we spoke. Megan had similar experiences in court, and said that “…He was sitting straight across from me and giving me those looks, his looks...them looks like he could kill me, you know…” On top of the normal stigma of the courtroom environment, these women were confronting men who abused them and, in many cases, they still felt and received consequences from their abusers for taking this action.

The fear expressed by the women in this sample was well founded. Most of the abusers had used perhaps the most effective weapon of all in the arsenal of control over the women, their children. For example, after Jessica left her abuser and he was served the temporary order in retaliation, “He called DHS...saying I was...[using drugs] with my child…” Although this claim was false, it turned into an investigation that claimed
much of the victim's emotional energy and time, as similar circumstances and
manipulations did in many of these women's situations. They often mentioned thinking
that they did not think the PO process would be any different and many still lived in fear
after they had been granted their final POs.

Seeking Help by Informal, then Formal Means

Friends and family members

All of the women in this sample had obviously sought help from a professional
agency. However, they often went to their friends and family first and then came to the
shelter when they were ready to take steps, such as filing for protective orders or leaving
their homes. There were mixed sentiments expressed in regard to families. As in the
case of many of the other actors in the process, families seemed to go one way or the
other. That is, either the family was positive and helpful, or their responses and actions
were seen as another obstacle to overcome in the process of obtaining a protective order
and seeking safety. This finding is consistent with previous research that has found that
while family members are often the first group contacted in battered women's help-
seeking, that their responses are inconsistent, at best, and often a poor substitute for
seeking formal avenues of domestic violence support such as shelters or counseling
services (Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee & Sullivan; Moe, 2006). In past research, family
support has often been cited among the least consistent of the various help-seeking
activities sought by victims of domestic violence in terms of helpfulness to the victim
(Goodkind, et al., 2006; Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Lempert, 1997; Moe, 2006).

In the current study, patience seemed to be key for those who spoke positively of
their family members. Unfortunately, because of the nature of power and control in
many violent relationships, these women were purposefully and strategically cut off from their families by their abusers. This is a common tactic abusers use to keep their victims isolated (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). While family members may reach out several times, they may eventually become frustrated when the women drop previous protective orders and go back to the relationships. Kathryn spoke of this and her gratefulness to the shelter for understanding when her family did not, saying that,

My family pushed me away. I wasn’t allowed to have Christmas or Thanksgiving with my family. They wanted nothing to do with me. It wasn’t because they hated me. They loved me, they were afraid for me and they didn’t know how else to deal with that. But when I needed them most, they kinda turned their back on me. And really they didn’t understand...that was very comforting to my husband, because I didn’t have an ally. I didn’t have my family to go to...to comfort me, you know, to help me through any of the issues...

Unfortunately, while some women were helped tremendously by supportive family members, many spoke of a feeling of abandonment like this. This was especially true in regard to the dropping of the orders. Families were often regarded as unhelpful and not understanding when the women would drop their orders. However, the women in this sample reported the helpfulness of the shelter as unconditional. They all had a lot to say about the help they received in trying to obtain protective orders and reach other goals.

Professional agencies

This shelter seemed to be well funded and well equipped to handle the case load with which they are presented so it seemed like women were getting ample one-on-one time with their counselors and advocates. Overall, the role of the shelter was absolutely
instrumental in the narratives of these women. The shelter seemed to be good at communicating with other agencies, such as Human Services and a program in Iowa called Promised Jobs (a welfare to work program) and would try to assist the women with their transitions as much as possible by getting help from other agencies when necessary. While most of them reported significant problems related to filing and carrying out of their POs, it seemed that the shelter was always there to help to coordinate various services. While I do not have a comparative sample of those who were not involved in the shelter's services, many women reported themselves that they believed their lives were much improved by their having access to these victim services.

The shelter seemed to counter some of the problems I expected to find in the PO process for these women. Many studies have spent time determining the motivations that women have in dropping their orders of protection (Carlson, et al., 2000; Hart, 1996; Sorensen & Shen, 2005; Zoellner, et al., 2000). The women in this sample reported often dropping previous orders in order to reconcile with their abusers, usually because they were scared and felt more threatened after receiving the orders. Some felt that knowing his cycles and when he was likely to explode and be violent was easier to cope with than not knowing when he might show up or what he might do, as was the case upon separation and obtaining the PO. A few others dropped the orders because they wanted to reconcile with their abusers and felt the order had served its purpose in proving to him they were willing to take action. These women reported hoping that this would change him and often went through the PO process several times. Again, the common theme in these interviews was the education they were receiving from the shelter. While it is likely that women will continue to leave many times before their final separation from an
abusive relationship and there will always be a greater risk of homicide or increased violence during attempted separations, this particular shelter appears to be doing a good job of changing the lives of these women by making these things known to them as soon as they walk through the door. Once these women are equipped with knowledge, they have more tools with which to handle their lives and their children’s lives as they see fit.

Another way the shelter helped these victims was on a community level. One problem with dropping orders discussed previously was the negative treatment of women by law enforcement and judges. The women in this area often cited allegations by police that they might as well do nothing because the women would just drop the orders anyway. Again, the shelter has recognized this problem, hiring a community educator (with plans to hire of a community relations coordinator) in order to better equip the larger community with an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and involve the community in anti-violence efforts. Hopefully, as the police and courts are made up of members of the larger community, the entire PO process will be improved as people become more aware and concerned.

Worth noting as well is the supportive atmosphere at this shelter. As is well documented in the literature (Zoellner, et al., 2000; Fernandez, et al., 1997), the women in this area often complained of the paperwork involved in filing for the protective order. They found the questions to be redundant and the process to be generally draining in having to describe years and years of abuse on paper. However, they seemed to be helped enormously by the shelter workers who would help them organize their thoughts and make clear statements. Moe Wan (2000) reported the phenomenon of advocates wanting to keep a safe emotional distance and this leading to a less caring and helpful
demeanor on the part of helping professionals. In spending time at the shelter during these interviews, I observed many formal and informal counseling sessions between the staff. Indeed, they were aware of and potentially affected by what researchers have labeled “vicarious traumatization” (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). However, they were encouraged to get involved and it was never seen as negative to be emotionally involved in their clients’ lives. The director recognized that this would lead to high turnover within the staff, but seemed to be willing to accept that as a cost of providing higher quality care to the clients.

Another theme in regard to the shelter was the power of knowledge most of the women I interviewed possessed. These women were like text books, reciting domestic violence and other criminal justice lingo, including the “cycle of violence,” and the “power and control wheel.” The interviewees seemed to know what a protective order could and could not do for them. The shelter seemed to have a holistic approach, making sure that the PO was filed, when necessary, but also being realistic and helping the victims relocate when necessary and develop other safety plans. This is similar to the caring or helpful demeanor found in advocates in the Moe Wan (2000) study. Keeping the victims informed of the limits of a PO was key. It seemed that this shelter valued education of everyone who walks in the door as well as education of the community.

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1 Leonore Walker’s theory, the “cycles of violence,” include three phases of the violent relationship: “Tension-building,” “Acute battering incident,” and “Kindness and Contrite Loving Behavior” (1979).

2 The Power and Control Wheel, created by battered women in Duluth, Minnesota is a commonly accepted model of how abusers, with the need for power and control, use various methods and justifications (i.e.: coercion, threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, blaming, children, male privilege, and finances) in order to perpetrate violence against their intimate partners.
They employ a community educator and talk to each victim about the theories of domestic violence, which seemed to help victims recognize ways in which they have been victimized. This seemed to be quite useful in that, as is typical, many women will return to their abusers several times before leaving permanently. In the cases of these women, they seemed to recognize the problems with the power and control dynamics in their relationships more quickly the second or third time around and were therefore may have been less susceptible to coercion than other victims of abuse. Since I have no comparison sample, I cannot say this for certainty. Rather, the only comparison that can be drawn here is simply between previous literature and the group of women from this current study. Obviously, their perspectives were greatly diverse depending on where they were in the process. It seemed that the further removed from the abusive situations they were, the more “perspective” they had in that they spoke more generally about protective orders and even domestic violence in general.

Shelley reflected on her past actions in saying that, “…I was like one of these chronic…clients, I come and go, it’s like a revolving door for me.” Mahogany reflected on how her abuser had used every trick in the book to control her, explaining that, “I come into the shelter, I learned what abuse was, the emotional, the verbal, the physical. I learned what that was about and how they, the perpetrators manipulate you and control you and the ways they control you…” Mahogany continued later to demonstrate her knowledge on protective orders in saying that, “…[the protective order] is scary too because you know that when the woman tries to leave that’s [a] more dangerous [time]…” These women seemed to have a good perspective on the realities of their situations. Patti reflected on the principles of the power and control wheel, saying that,
“...and then there is all of the leverages that they use, your kids, your finances, your housing, your vehicle, these are all tools to keep you in your place.”

Overall, the women in this sample reflected on the shelter gratefully and had very emotionally driven statements on the degree to which they were assisted by the shelter workers. Merin said that,

I had really good people helping me, you know people who were not going to give up on me. They were going to fight for me and my kids, so... You have these people to help. Because I really don’t know how I could have done most of the stuff that I have done without them... I really don’t.... I don’t know what it would be like right now.

Keep in mind that these were women referred by the shelter workers, so I probably did not have any representation if there were women who had bad experiences with the shelter, but certainly these success stories should not be ignored. Although the POs were seen as instrumental, the shelter put them in their proper place, as one step in a process of finding safety, not to be relied on wholly. They utilized the PO process fully in their more holistic view on victim empowerment.

**Civil Protective Orders and Provisions**

As discussed in the literature review, provisions have been added to civil POs in recognition of the needs of women in DV situations (Eigenberg, et al., 2003; DeJong & Burgess, 2006). While the shelter did provide for many of these needs and they were not always fully utilized in court proceedings, the evolution of the PO in the state of Iowa was still seen as beneficial to some women in this sample. One such woman was Abby, who could recall how POs have changed over the years. She said,
I like how it addresses child custody issues now. I think that helps a lot. And the housing. Because at the time [that I filed]...he said it was his house and that was just how law enforcement looked at it...I mean, I went to my parents but now you have an option so that they can stay in the house and I think that makes a big difference so the kids don’t have to be put somewhere else...

Regarding these structural needs, the provisions that are now included in civil orders seemed to be helpful and women reflected appreciatively that there was an action that they could take that would include such provisions as finances and temporary child custody. While these provisions were helpful, they are useful only insofar as they are respected by the perpetrators. Many women found it useless to have a piece of paper that said that they should be receiving financial assistance or the use of the family home if their abusers held no regard for such provisions. As with the utility of the original intent of the orders before the provisions, it all relates back to the degree to which the abusers follow them.

In this study, I intended to look at ways in which victims may be empowered by the PO process but it must be noted that by way of my sampling technique, that is, taking a convenience sample of the shelter’s clients, I am already talking to victims who are empowered in some ways. In fact, one of the central themes that emerged in this data in regard to the service provided to the clients by the employees and volunteers of DSAOC was the high degree to which the victims seemed to have their needs taken care of by the shelter. Setting out to investigate whether the PO process itself was addressing the practical needs of the victims such as housing, job training, financial needs, transportation and child care, I asked every victim if those needs were addressed in court
and most replied that they were not or that while they saw the option to check for provisions on the protective order application, that in some way or another, the shelter was addressing their needs. It was typical, after asking the clients if they had needs that were addressed during the final protective order hearings, for them to make statements like, “no, the shelter was taking care of that.” Accordingly, it seemed that the judges would rarely address any of the provisions listed on the order during court, but rather simply grant or deny the order and hurriedly moved on to the next case. In observation of DSAOC, the workers seemed to counter this judicial tendency by being quite resourceful in getting clients the things they needed in order to take whatever steps they wanted to take when they were ready to take them. Unfortunately, because of this particular sample and the extent of the current investigation, there is no way to tell whether the judges knew that victims who come with DSAOC advocates would have their needs taken care of or whether the shelter takes care of those needs because they know that the PO process or the criminal justice system will not.

**Positive and Negative Outcomes of Engaging in the PO Process in this Rural Area**

Although I had an interest in this area because it is rural, I had not set out to specifically focus on rural community and barriers posed by rural life. However, the subject was prevalent in the discussion with these petitioners. Many times, before I would ask, the women would cite specific obstacles that are unique to rural PO filers. While there were some positive aspects that I will reflect on later in this section, there were some major problems faced by women in these rural areas.

Websdale (1995), in discussing rural domestic violence, defines what he considers rural living as those living outside of cities, in the country, or those living in communities
less than 5,000. He also indicates that, "rural" may "refer to certain types of communities where people know each other’s business, come into more regular contact with each other, and share a larger core of values than is true of people in urban areas" (p. 102). DSAOC serves one larger city, Fort Dodge, one city of 8,000, and six outlying counties, consisting of towns with a population of less than 5,000. About half of the women I interviewed lived in outlying, rural areas in the country or in towns of 5,000 or less. About half lived in Fort Dodge. While the population of Fort Dodge is over 20,000, many of those who discussed rural problems, even without being prompted, were discussing this town where they indicated that people knew their business or where they felt like they could not go anywhere without running into their abusers or his family. Additionally, Fort Dodge had many characteristics common in rural life. For example, most people belonged to one of the main Christian churches in town and most people seemed to know the “secret” location of the shelter simply through pizza delivery and post office gossip chains. There are a few main social locations (bars) where most people go and most people have at least heard of everyone else who lives in Fort Dodge. In fact, it is interesting to note is that those who lived and filed for POs in Fort Dodge reflected more without prompting on the rural problems than those who filed from much more rural towns or lived in the country.

Negative outcomes

Many women noted obstacles related to living in a small community where everyone knows your every move and intense social pressures are felt by the specific type of gossip and isolation felt in rural areas. Gossip is common in all areas. However, one
cannot escape other peoples' opinions in small towns. Verna reflected on her embarrassment and lack of privacy in Fort Dodge in saying,

...By the time all the stories get back to me, they are totally false. I mean, this town has...a big problem with gossip...it is like, most of the time when things get back to me, it is like that is not even close to how anything happened and what happened or anything like that, so I mean...it's a mess...Having a protective order in such a small town where you're known highly is a bad thing... it is not so much like a reputation, but it is just, having so many people talk about you behind your back, and in a negative way...why do I even bother?

Verna was aware and disapproving of what people were saying about her and felt that filing for and having a PO was stigmatizing to her and her children.

Living in a rural area poses problems with law enforcement as well. Mahogany, who also lived in Fort Dodge, was reflecting on the police's willingness to assist her and mentioned that,

I think [the police] just didn't want to get involved with it...because a lot of [policemen] knew him...I mean, they weren't friends, but they were acquaintances that lived in that town most of their lives so they knew him and ...

[they] just didn't want to get between [us]...

Like a few others, the small town was especially problematic for Mahogany since her abuser had grown up there while she was fairly new to the town. This may prevent law enforcement officers from suggesting PO as an option, from referring victims to services, or from arresting abusers with whom they are acquainted.
The availability of law enforcement seemed also to be an issue when these women were trying to report PO violations. Lindsey, who lived in a town of less than a thousand residents, reflected on her inability to get police to respond to violations of the order in saying that,

[My town] is a small town, doesn't even having a police department so its pretty easy to get away with stuff there, it would take at least 20 minutes to get a sheriff out of [a larger nearby town]... *(Interviewer: So that's who you would have to call would be the sheriff's department from [the larger nearby town]?)* Or try and get a hold of [another nearby county] sheriff's office, unless there happens to be a highway patrolman going by.

This whole dialogue was very telling in that Lindsey was indicating to me that it is not even clear as to whom one would call if she had an emergency in this small town. There were a few different options, neither of which was particularly close by.

Another problem with protective orders in rural areas such as small towns and in the country between towns is purely logistical. With so few people in the common areas such as main roads and grocery stores, one is bound to run into someone, whether he/she wants to see them or not. Some abusers used this to their advantage, claiming ignorance when they stalked their victims. This also made it difficult for women who wanted a clean break and hoped that the PO would provide such a separation, since they still saw their abusers around town. Laura, who lived in Fort Dodge, found this particularly bothersome and reflected that,
[I saw him] just around town. I could drive to Wal-Mart and back and...see him twice within that time. I was not even looking for him, I was not trying to contact him...Like, in one weekend, I saw him like five times...

Also typical in small towns is knowing a person by his or her car. This is problematic for women who are trying to get legal assistance in order to file the initial, temporary order and keep it secret from their abusers and his family or friends. One woman, Patti, mentioned having to carefully consider this and mentioned that, “The attorney I went to had a parking lot that was kinda tucked away so that you couldn’t see it from the street.” She obviously had thought of this and selected the attorney carefully based on this kind of criteria. This was in Fort Dodge. In even smaller towns where there is only one attorney, this would not have been an option.

Another common complaint related to both the small towns and the emotional barriers of taking the step to get a protective order in a small town was the isolation of having to separate from common friends shared by the abuser and the petitioner. In cities, one has many options for new social networks, churches and people groups. However, in small towns, there is often only one main network of people and if one is separated from that group, there is not anywhere else to turn. So, since the PO calls for no contact, including third party contact, this is even more difficult for rural filers. One interviewee, Abby, responded to this by just staying away. She said, “…Unfortunately, my friends were his friends, you know, and so...I just stayed away.” While common friends are typical of many dating and married couples, being separated from the main group with no other options seemed to be especially isolating in these smaller communities.
Positive outcomes

While there were specific obstacles to obtaining protective orders related to the rural community, a large number of the women also reflected on how the rural community acted as a positive influence in their pursuit of a PO as a response to domestic violence. Having a supportive community surrounding them was always instrumental in the stories I heard from the women in this shelter.

In some cases, being in a small town worked out well for the state of mind of the victims. Since word spreads so quickly, if the victim was known to a lot of people to be one of the “good townspeople”, the abuser might be censured by the community. The most drastic case of this is exemplified in the somewhat humorous statements of a woman named Shirley, who said,

The decent people that I know, um, the volunteer fire department, which is all a close knit clan...and the search and rescue people and all of them...well, they heard it right on the radio when everything happened. And, a lot of them are my friends so they already knew his reputation and they are very supportive. I mean...they just called me and said if you need anything, you know, if he shows up, just call me and these are people who live within houses of me and that sort of thing, so that...is good... (Interviewer: what about the police?) The police, oh, I know both of them...the one...he is a great guy and I had talked to him about [the abuse] before. And when I had left the house, I had asked him to watch over...and then the other officer is a...pretty good guy, too...knowing my character, knowing my kids, you know...I guess apparently they were not really cooperative with him coming to get his stuff. They gave him kind of a hard time
about it and made it to where it was totally at their convenience... and apparently...[my abuser] was saying to them... "How am I going to get to work, I got to get my truck" and all of this and they said, "well you should have thought of that before you abused your wife and kids"...and that is a definite [benefit of small towns] because I have lived in huge cities...

Obviously, Shirley felt affirmed by the supportiveness of the people she knew if the various helping agencies around the town.

Shirley continued to talk about other people in other agencies that were helpful to her and clearly disapproving of her abuser’s actions,

...Once [my abuser] was found innocent [of criminal charges] and then he was served with...the civil protection order, right after court, then he was really mad...He went around and anything that was in his name, he had shut off, he had the phone shut off, he tried to get the mailbox changed, he wanted the utilities switched over, or shut off...but the telephone people know me, the gals down there...so...I just called them and said what is going on with the phone... they said [my abuser] had shut it off...come on in and we will get you a new phone number... it cost me, 18 dollars, less than the phone bill and [they told me] he has to pay the phone bill...the postmaster, he knows me...so ...when I went in he said, well [my abuser had] called yesterday and wanted to close the box and he...told him he has to come in and do that...he asked, “you are living in the house, right?” And I say “yeah,” He said, “well then you get yours for free and his will cost him 50 dollars.” And then the secretary of the town and the guy that does all of the utilities of the town, he knows me well. So when I went in there to get
them switched over in my name, then he was, you know, really willing to work with me and...you know, understanding. Where in a big city, you wouldn’t get any of that...

Of course, it takes knowing everyone and being on the inside of the primary social group or clique within the rural community to get this kind of treatment. Additionally, this kind of treatment may be especially stigmatizing and upsetting for the abuser and could lead to retaliatory violence against the victim. However, the women in this sample were extremely appreciative of the positive community treatment they received within this realm. These made the necessary immediately separation required by the PO that was problematic for many of the women easier in many ways.

Most of the smaller towns of the women I interviewed seemed like the traditional, “wholesome” towns that one would hope for in a situation like this. The people were helpful and while usually keeping somewhat distant, seemed to want to help the victims. One woman named Sandy told of this in saying that,

This town has been absolutely wonderful...they don’t even know the full situation but knowing that I’m alone with my kids, ya know, everybody gives me so much credit... and when I moved to town, ya know, I had people all the time, bring...cookies...we’ve had, um, snow several times and I’ve not swepted the driveway once...I mean, they don’t know exactly what’s going on, but they know things aren’t right.

Clearly, Sandy, and others with similar stories, was enjoying the silent yet strong support of this tight knit community. Women often spoke of neighbors calling the police and helping them in various other ways.
A typical problem described in existing research involves bureaucracy. The women in this area seemed to think that the rural setting was helpful during the protective order process, including the filing of extensions, in combating problems that arise from this. Many reported knowing people at the county attorney’s office or knowing law enforcement officers. Having smaller government and private agencies to deal with was helpful in that they knew and remembered each other. They seemed to feel that they were treated like people rather than numbers. In cases like this, the benefits of the rural areas were less intentional and more of a function of the town’s size. Some of the women knew their county attorneys, the police officers and even the clerks at the courthouse, all of whom proved helpful in speeding the process of paperwork or even skipping some steps altogether. People remembered their cases and they often were able to bypass some of the bureaucratic obstacles that other women faced in having to tell their stories numerous times or having to face skepticism when they tried to renew their POs. The women I spoke with often reflected on the benefits of being remembered by various court system workers. Shelley said, about trying to renew her order,

Another woman that works for the courthouse really stands out...when I went a year ago to file...for another one...she...told me that normally without any occurrences happening...they wouldn’t [give you another one]...but because she remembered [the severity of] my case...she allowed it.

Many women reflected in similar ways regarding the benefits of being known by people who were in places of power when it came to the PO process.

Another theme that emerged in regard to this area was the nature of many involved citizens. This shelter is highly active in the communities in its coverage area
(especially in its home city, Fort Dodge) and employs a community educator to raise awareness of the importance of being a community that is not tolerable of domestic violence. I observed the effectiveness of the shelter’s efforts in the women’s statements. Jessica had her neighbor, who she did not even know, helping her monitor her house after she had received the protective order. In explaining, she said,

The lady across the street was watching the house, that called 911 for me every time, she called me [and said] “He’s over there right now, do you want me to call 911 or do you not want me to?”

Having a supportive community was instrumental in these women’s lives at crucial times. Previous research highlights uninformed and/or negative attitudes from the general population toward victims of domestic violence and how positive social support greatly increases positive outcomes for victims of DV (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra & Weintraub, 2005). The results from this study is counter to these previous findings in that many women seemed to find their communities helpful in their pursuit of safety. It is hard to say whether DSAOC’s community outreach efforts are causing this difference. This result could be a function of a number of spurious relationships (i.e.: subject selection and recruiting, interview prompts that may have led them to think of helpful parties by questions such as, “Was there anyone you found particularly helpful to you in the process?”). Further investigation should be done to this end. Possibly, this exploratory study has uncovered effective initiatives that have made a difference in the understanding attitudes and helpful behaviors in the general population of the DSAOC coverage area. One possibility for further exploration would be a community attitudes
survey comparing towns that DSAOC serves with other towns with similar characteristics.

**Law Enforcement and Courts**

**Police**

Another major research question of this project dealt with the major actors in the PO process and how the women perceived their interactions with them. Members of law enforcement were often the first group that victims would come in contact with as they were deciding to take the step of applying for a protective order. There seemed to be a particular polarization in the attitudes and actions of the police officers. The women I interviewed reflected on them as either a highly positive influence in their situations or as a major part of the problem.

Current domestic violence literature is rich with discussion of problematic police culture and the resulting problem in the treatment of women (see Apsler, et al., 2003; Buzawa & Buzawa, 1993; Ferraro, 1993; Narayanan, 2005; Paoline, et al., 2000; Worden, 1993). This was definitely echoed by women in this sample, as the general idea expressed by the majority was that the police did not take domestic violence seriously. Many of the women reflected on phone calls and face to face interactions with officers where they seemed to find ways to get out of having to do anything about a situation. Citing of police department policies that supposedly prevented them from continuing to involve themselves in a situation was quite common. While there were a few exceptions of police officers who were helpful and kind, most seemed to be impatient in dealing with domestic violence. This corroborates previous findings that indicate that police take
protective orders, and domestic violence in general less seriously than other types of crime (Harris, et al., 2001; Levens & Dutton, 1998).

While many of the women had negative things to say about the people in the local police departments or sheriffs’ offices, some did reflect on caring and helpful law enforcement officers who were instrumental in bringing positive changes to their lives. Accordingly, the instances of particularly caring officers should not be ignored. Jessica spoke fondly of a police officer who was of much assistance to her. She said,

She’s a wonderful lady. In my past history, you think [I] wouldn’t want to have nothing to do with cops or even try and get along with one... [but] she was very polite to me instead of treating me like another convict or whatever. She helped me out with my affidavits and the restraining orders, trying to help me understand...

Many women reacted similarly when officers did even so little as to give a kind word or tell them about the shelter or about POs. This is similar to the responses of women in previous studies that found the courteousness of police officers and court personnel particularly helpful (Fisher & Rose, 1995; Coker, 2000). While previous research (Paoline, Myers & Worden, 2000; Worden, 1993) suggests that characteristics such as sex and race have little effect on differences in police attitudes, it is interesting that the only officer reported to have gone far above and beyond what was expected was also the only female officer mentioned during the interviews. There is not enough data to draw conclusions given that this was only one instance but future research in this area might investigate police attitudes and include gender as a demographic indicator.
An emergent theme of those whose impression of the police was largely negative was in the way that law enforcement responded to PO violations, often threatening or seeming to blame the victim. Over half of the women in this sample were threatened at one time or another by law enforcement officers that they could be sent to jail for a violation when the victims would call to report violations. Patti was ordered in court to allow her abuser to come and collect his belongings. When that time came, she called and asked the police if she could get an officer to be present during this time, and was told, by the officer (as quoted by her), “No, and if we come out there then you’ll be in trouble, too, for violation because you let him come on the property.” Vicki recalled angrily when she had called to report a violation that, “…They just pushed the fact that…you can be arrested, too for breaking the protective order...But like I have told them, safe in jail time is a lot easier than facing repercussions from him…”

These threats by the police were not empty ones, as I talked to some women who had been arrested and jailed for violating a protective order. This corroborates previous evidence presented by researchers who have found victim-blaming attitudes of various kinds in the law and law enforcement officers (Home, 1994; Stewart & Maddren, 1997). This may be compounded in the state of Iowa by the legal recourse available that allows the petitioner of the civil POs to be jailed for violating the order. Even though “dual orders” are discouraged in Iowa code (Iowa Judicial Code 236.20, 2003), this available punishment of the petitioner ends up working in the same way as a dual order would, where both victim and offender are punished. In most instances, it seems that the victims were pressured by their abusers to let them back into their homes. Shelley reflected on this time in her life, saying, “The first [protective order], I tried to drop it, I tried to drop
...they wouldn’t let me. Any they put me in jail because I was with my perpetrator...” This statement speaks of the willingness of the criminal justice system in this area to follow through with threats to punish both parties who are in violation of a protective order.

*Judges and other court personnel*

Previous research discusses the scary and intimidating courtroom environment (Fisher & Rose, 1995). This was indeed the case with the women in this sample, but most were not deterred from completion by this as they all reported having counselors there with them who helped them prepare for hearings and who went along as support during the hearings. The court personnel most commonly mentioned by the women were judges. The main idea expressed was power and the apprehension related to how that power would be expressed in a given situation. These women saw the judge as a person, and the courtroom as a place, of great power over their lives. As Laura put it, “…There’s a lot of power in that room. And the judge sitting there’s got a lot of power...just the whole idea of walking into the courtroom...my hands are sweating like crazy.” Even though most of these women felt that they were doing the right thing, they were still nervous about the court experience and fearful of what the judge would do. This is similar to the results in the Fisher and Rose (1995) study that found that women who applied for protective orders saw the law as a “force greater than themselves” (p. 423).

Since the judge was a person given much power in the lives of these women, the opinion of the judges mattered highly to these women so both positive and negative experiences were internalized deeply. Most of the women in this sample approved of their treatment by the judges. In fact, most found the judge to be helpful to them as they
found the legitimization of having someone in an authority role affirm their beliefs that they should not have to endure such abuse. Shelley reflected on how much the PO experiences, and specifically the judge's opinion in her PO hearing, mattered to her, saying that,

I became more independent almost immediately after my protective order...after I had that one [judge] say, “this isn’t right, don’t do this again”...I know my counselors and everybody here did that but... I guess it was different... looking at the judge and seeing a judge do that, or somebody in authority, somebody that has authority over him too, I think that made [a difference]...

Expressions like this, which came from a person of power, affirmed for the women that they were doing the right thing.

A problem addressed in literature is the negative behavior of some judges (Moe Wan, 2000; Ptacek, 1999). Unfortunately, the experiences of these women with the judges were not always positive. As in the Ptacek (1999) study as well as the Moe Wan (2000) study on judicial demeanor, the judges in this area seemed to run the gambit in terms of helpfulness. Most were described as somewhat helpful while a few seemed to be characterized by a condescending attitude toward the women, especially in regard to their concerns toward their children. A few judges seemed to go outside of what would intuitively seem safe for the children in order uphold with the notion that fathers have a right to see their children. A few women in this sample described judges they perceived as rude or condescending, especially in regard to women's hopes surrounding their children. Most of them were hoping for little to no visitation and judges seemed to always cite a father's right to see his children, no matter the special circumstances.
While the majority of the judges seemed to act with the bureaucratic demeanor noted by Moe Wan (2000) and Ptacek (1999), if the judge’s response was negative or condescending or the protective order was denied, the women seemed extra sensitive to that, given the power and authority they felt the judge had over their lives. In one case, a woman named Kathryn was denied the coverage of her daughter in a protective order, as the judge saw no reason to keep the father away from his daughter. She reflected on the moments after the order was denied in court in saying that,

[My abuser] has threatened to punch my daughter, which is his daughter too… I had said to that judge, “So does that mean that because he’s her father he has the right to do things to hurt her?” and the judge was very nasty. He was very nasty to me. After I said that he kinda… snapped [and said] “Well, in this state, fathers have a right to visit their kids…”

In many instances similar to this, the women’s negative perceptions of judges centered around what they wanted for their kids and the tendency of judges to want to enable the fathers (no matter what their criminal records looked like or how much they had allegedly abused the mother) to see their children. The strangest instance of this was in the case of Merin who was denied coverage of her children on the PO but told by the judge that she could be in trouble for child endangerment if she took the kids near him given his criminal record and history of violence. This “failure to protect” legislation that considers the witnessing of domestic violence as a form of child abuse, is highly controversial and has been discussed in recent literature (Hartley, 2004; Kantor & Little, 2003; Schechter & Edleson, 1999; Shepard & Raschick, 1999). Many studies discuss the slippery slope of these laws, as they are often slanted toward prosecution of the mother
since mothers are typically seen as the primary parental figures even though they are not the primary perpetrators of violence in the home (Kantor & Little, 2003; Mills, 2000). Unfortunately, many woman are held responsible for a failure to protect their children from the children’s father’s (and the woman’s partner’s) violence toward the children, even when the women are being abused as well (Davidson, 1995; Davis, 1995; Hartley, 2004; Magen; 1999; Saunders & Anderson, 2000).

Important questions related to this issue to consider are: Is staying in a violent relationship alone enough to prosecute a woman? Is this prosecution simply further victimization for DV victims or a necessary step to end the cycles whereby children in abusive situations often become abusers themselves? It seems especially contradictory that in this case, Merin was denied a protective order for herself and her children, yet threatened by the judge that she could be prosecuted for failure to protect nonetheless. In pondering these questions, she suggested that this may have been related to a negative attitude toward women on the part of the judge. This judge was accused by two other women of blaming victims and making PO proceedings difficult for them in any way he could. This corroborates the Moe Wan (2000) finding of judges who demonstrate openly sexist mannerisms toward victims.

Another group that was commonly reflected on were county attorneys (CAs), with whom there seemed to be a lot of ties and contact during the protective order process despite it being a civil proceeding. The main reason for this contact was that there were often criminal proceedings going on at the same time as the civil proceedings, particularly if the instance that brought them to seek a civil PO coincided with an incident involving the police. Similar to judges, it seems that the women always had an opinion
one way or another on the helpfulness of the county attorneys. This role was also seen as a force more powerful than themselves. As Laura put it, “The County Attorney’s office has more power than the individual alone.”

Often, women who file for protective orders come into much criticism for dropping the orders. It is well established in the literature, and seemingly in this area, known to judges, that there are times when the victims may be coerced by their abusers to drop the orders (Hart, 1996; Quarm & Schwartz, 1985). Many judges would reportedly ask carefully if the women were being forced to drop the order in the court hearing held to do so. Still, I heard from many women that they dropped their orders because they felt they had to for their personal safety. One extreme case that I found quite problematic involved a young woman named Staci whose abuser sat her down and forced her to write a letter, asking the judge to drop the order. Even though she never appeared in person, the judge, together with the county attorney and her abuser later used these letters in a phone conversation to pressure her to drop the order. Staci reflected on this phone conversation in saying that,

... I felt like I was really pressured...[by] the county attorney and also the judge because they see that he is...wanting to try [and get help] so I feel like I was just lost for words. I didn’t know what to say...[the county attorney] said that in the past, I have wrote some letters to the judges to get the restraining order dropped...I... was pressured by [my abuser] to [write the letters] and they had [originally] told me that they wouldn’t drop the restraining order because there had been too much violence in the house. And, in order for them to drop it, he had to prove that he was...[getting help]. And, so, [my abuser] showed [the
county attorney] that he is doing this now and so they dropped it. (Interviewer: 
So they dropped it, how do you feel about that?) I just, I feel like I was pressured 
into it... and I am kind of scared.

Clearly, more care should be taken in the dropping of protective orders. I do not 
know the specifics of this particular case from any other perspective other than the 
victim’s but it seems inappropriate for a county attorney to call a victim with the abuser 
standing in his office and ask the petitioner if she still wants to drop the order based on 
some letters that he should have speculated that the abuser had written or forced her to 
write. It is possible that the CA thought he was doing the right thing. This leads me to 
suspect that there may be a need for proper training of various criminal justice personnel 
in this area, including CAs, on the dynamics of domestic violence.

Still, the majority of those who had experiences with the CAs had positive ones. 
This may be due to the fact that the reason that there was contact is because there was a 
criminal prosecution of the offender occurring which was almost always viewed as a 
good thing by this group of women. The CAs in this area seemed willing and 
cooperative in prosecuting domestic violence. Merin even went to the county attorney 
after being denied a civil PO (by a judge who she thought was prejudiced against women) 
and the CA helped her obtain a criminal no contact order. She seemed pleased with the 
county attorney and said, “the county attorney, um... he is actually the one that got me 
the [criminal] protective order...when the [other] judge would not grant me the protection 
order, he did get me one...” When it comes to these judges and county attorneys and 
other people in places of power, it seemed that a little went a long way and helpful 
treatment toward the victims was always greatly appreciated. This increased
collaboration of agencies and services, including the combination of the civil and
criminal PO, confirms current literature suggesting that various anti-domestic violation
initiatives are increasingly working in coordination (Harrell & Smith, 1996; Hart, 1996).

There were a few glitches in the protective order process in court that while not
largely thematic, were noteworthy. One woman took issue with the fact that she was
asked to state her address out loud in court. This tipped her abuser off to where she was
staying and she was upset that the process of getting a protective order in itself
endangered her. Iowa statute permits the plaintiff in a protective order case to give the
mailing address of a shelter or other agency or any other mailing address whose resident
gives permission (Iowa Judicial Code 236.10, 2003). Obviously, however, Jessica did
not know this and the judge did not tell her. He simply reiterated, after she asked if she
was really required to state her address, that she did, in fact, have to state her name and
address out loud in court. Again, it is possible that increased training on the dynamics of
domestic violence could be useful to court personnel, including judges.

The Efficacy of the Obtained Orders

Of course, the experiences of the women in my sample were diverse, and just as
some found the PO to be helpful, others stated that it did nothing for them. Vicki, when
asked if there was anything good about POs said,

Um...no. I think they tend to...some people it would help out...but with other
perpetrators, it just tends to make them more mad...[and] because of the [short]
sentencing of breaking an... order, they get out the next day and [its] not enough
time to really make them calm down...
Unfortunately, there were several women in this sample who felt this way about POs. This was a justifiable feeling in many cases. As Laura said, “[The victim] is scared to death, she’s already been beaten up, but she’ll get beaten up [more] for doing the right thing…. Not that she did anything wrong in the first place.”

In contrast to those for whom the protective order served no purpose that they could think of, there were also a handful of women for whom the PO served the purpose of keeping their abusers away and keeping them safe as a result. Many of the women in this sample reported a feeling of safety after receiving the PO. If the women felt safe, this was seen as a success of the protective order process. Regarding her PO, Shelley said,

I liked it. I liked it so much that if I have to for the rest of my life, I will continue to file every year… I plan on filing again… because it’s the only time I feel safe.

The protective order has helped.

Although her husband had not stopped harassing her, Shelley felt that,

…Because I had the protective order, my husband didn’t physically hurt me…. if I wouldn’t have had the protective order, I think I might have been really hurt and I might not be here now. It doesn’t prevent the harassment but it… I think it may have saved my life.

This feeling of safety was an important theme from these women and an important need that the PO fulfilled in many cases.

Sherman and Berk (1984) and later replication experiments (see Johnson, Luna & Stein, 2003; Sherman, Smith & Schmidt, 2003) have tested the “stakes in conformity” hypothesis which supposes that abusers with certain characteristics (such as being
employed, completion of high school, marriage) will have a higher interest in conformity and will therefore be more responsive to legal interventions such as a PO. There have been mixed results regarding whether these varying characteristics of the abuser will increase the likelihood that they will be deterred from future violence by arrests for violation of a PO issued against them (Johnson, et al., 2003; Sherman, 1992; Sherman, et al., 1992). While I did not have access to information on abusers’ education or employment, I found that those women who were married to their abusers were more likely to report success in having their abusers follow the POs. While Sherman’s own (1992) replication of the original study returned mixed results on the marital status indicator, none of the women in this sample who said that their abusers did not follow the order at all were married to them. Additionally, in this sample, those perpetrators who were offenders in other areas were less likely to obey the PO. While my findings seem to corroborate this one variable in the stakes in conformity hypothesis, I did not have access to as much information on the abusers (namely, arrests versus non arrests). Rather, deterrence from future violence was measured through the perceptions of the PO petitioners and their opinions on whether the PO “worked.”

Feelings of Empowerment

Moving on to answering the question of what role the women felt that the PO played in helping them achieve their goals, the most common theme in this area was in the personal feelings of empowerment. The women in this study all discussed their positive feelings of affirmation in having other people tell them that the abuse is not okay, especially with police officers and judges when they were helpful. This confirms previous research that found this emotional empowerment as the best outcome for PO
petitioners (Eigenberg, et al., 2003). While almost every woman in this sample used the phrase, “just a piece of paper,” many also reflected on how it was a very important piece of paper in their lives. These women often said that they felt good about doing something for themselves, that this was the first step in a new kind of existence where they had power and control over their own lives. Shelley’s testimony spoke of this perfectly when she said that,

> It seems that [for] me personally, I became more independent almost immediately after my protective order...after I had that one person (the judge) say this isn’t right... I took a stand for myself. And ya know... I have...daughters now and...I don’t want them to think that this is normal, a normal relationship. So, I took a stand that, that was a big turning point for me... I see it as an example for my kids...that they see me stand up for myself and fight for myself and saying...I’m not going to allow this person to treat me like this anymore.

Laura had similar thoughts and said, “I think for any victim, for any woman to go file pro se, she’s empowering herself. Signaling that what’s happening is wrong...she wants it to stop.” Many of these women took much pride in themselves in taking the steps that they wanted to take in filing for the protective order in order to help themselves. One woman named Lindsey put it short and simple, saying that, “[the PO] makes you...do something to improve your life.”

Another way that the PO served the emotional needs of the women was through the people whose attention it brought to the situation and who believed that the victims had the right to live a violence free life. These women greatly valued having people on their side. Because of the dynamics of domestic violence and the control by the abusers
over these women’s lives, having people behind them was symbolically quite important.

As one woman reflected on her PO hearing,

...I felt relieved, like finally somebody believes me. Ya know, an authority figure like a judge, he believed me... *(Interviewer: Were there other people before that...)* That didn’t believe me. [They thought] I was crazy or whatever. So this was a good experience for me personally...My husband was very good at...making people think it was me, I was at fault...I was making up things [and] I believed it. Until now, now I know that it wasn’t my fault and that judge, that first judge, helped me realized it... That was a good day for me.

Stories like this were common, where the woman spent a long time believing that the abuse was her fault and then realizing that what was happening to her was not okay through the symbolic act of obtaining a protective order.

Overall, the results of this study seem to corroborate many findings from pervious research. However, there may be some issues worth exploring further in this area including: rural domestic violence and rural PO filing, community responses to DV in rural areas, effects of DV education on community attitudes, and the effects of educational empowerment on the perceived success of POs from victims’ perspectives. These new insights both enhance existing literature as well as counter previous results in many ways.
CONCLUSIONS

Structured Action and the Possible Effects of the Shelter on Advocating for Social Change

As this study was founded in structured action theory, I must reflect on the empowerment of women and the ways in which this theory was demonstrated in this study. The women to whom I talked were indeed constrained by a lack of financial resources, transportation, job experiences and other predicaments particularly related to rurality. They were trying to use a legal system for help, which was problematic in many ways. However, this shelter is advocating for social change and there seems to be social change occurring in this community. The community events and fundraisers for the shelter are well attended and supported highly by the community’s businesses. Importantly, the attitudes of the people in the area seem to be slightly more visible, as illustrated by their stances against domestic and sexual violence. In short, the shelter is leading the way toward a context in which the community at large sees domestic violence as generally unacceptable behavior.

However, there is a long way to go in terms of punishment. While it seems generally unacceptable to batter, most people probably would not say that engaging in intimate partner violence calls for much punishment. This makes it difficult for legal reform toward not referring to the PO process as a primary criminal justice response to domestic violence as it makes sense to refer to civil processes for violations that are not serious enough for criminal processes.

Possibly most important, though, is that the women in this study were empowered as soon as they walked through the door of the shelter by the knowledge they received in counseling. So, while the protective order was not seen as the step to ending violence, it
was a step, and a positive one. The victims with whom I spoke seemed to think that those understandings made great differences in their lives, enabling them to make change and seek paths they may not have otherwise chosen given the lack of power of various kinds most victims of DV have (Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Additionally, the help they received from advocates allowed them to bypass almost all of the traditionally researched barriers to completion of the protective order. So, the shelter is acting within structures such as the PO process but using it in ways that empower women and redefine these structure, as such.

Intuitively, one would think that police officers would share some attitudes with the communities in which they live and work. So, if the people in this area seemed to have generally supportive attitudes and helpful actions toward victims of domestic violence, that the police in this area would as well. However, the law enforcement responses to POs and especially the violations thereof seemed to be consistent with the attitudes and behaviors observed of police in other areas. Possibly, there is something in police subculture that "trumps" the culture of these communities. Previous research has conceptualized police subculture and the constructions of police responses to domestic violence orders (Narayanan, 2005). Most have looked at situational or cultural circumstances surrounding police actions. Studies have found the police find that domestic violence responses (under which protective order violations would fall) are not seen as being as glorious or awarded as other types of police work (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1993). Others may believe that POs are generally unproductive as the victims will eventually drop them anyway (Field & Field, 1973; Ferraro, 1993). Narayanan (2005) used Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ to show how there may be
additional structures and subcultural processes occurring, which differentiate the police from the general population in any given area.

The fact that I found the direction of this research straying from the specificity of POs to domestic violence in general should be considered conceptually. I found that this constant drift to domestic violence was at least partially due to my interviewing strategy. Because my interview strategy was not only to talk specifically with the victims about POs, but also to let them talk about what they thought was relevant in the process, it turned out that the problems in the PO process are inseparably linked to the larger problems in domestic violence. The power and control of the abuser over the victim continues even though they may be physically separated. So, this PO process is such a part of domestic violence because it has been created within the constraints of DV and the current criminal justice system. However, insofar as the women are able to see it in this way, they are able to make it a tool of theirs. So, they are acting within the structure of the PO process that already exists with all its nuances and constraints but they also own it a recreating the PO as something they can use to assist in meeting the goals they have in their lives.

This is where this shelter seems to be contributing greatly because, instead of pushing victims through an existing system, they focus on victim empowerment and use every opportunity they can to council and educate in order to show the women what the PO can and cannot do in their lives. This is aligned with structured action with regard to the theoretical principle that action creates structure, as the actions of the shelter are empowering the women to create structures for themselves. They are changing what Bourdieu (1991) would call the ‘habitus,’ that is, what these women had previously even
considered or thought was possible for their lives. From here then, their outlooks and actions are subsequently changed. This supports Giddens’ (1984) contention that those without power can have some control over their superiors when those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. In the cases of these participants, regardless of whether the PO “worked” or not, it still gave them power in that they could say where he could and could not go. Even if he did not comply, he still had to go to court or make other arrangements based on something that she did so she was influencing his actions at least indirectly. Giddens (1984) also contends that what resources a person has at his/her disposal determines power, so empowering the victims to see the PO as a resource at their disposal is in itself an empowering and changing process.

Contributions to the Discipline

This study makes a contribution to the discipline by adding new voices to the existing body of interview data. The emergent themes brought forth by this sample both affirm the existing themes and add to the literature in new ways. These themes are important as there is a need to do more research in rural areas (Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Although this area may be considered partially “urban” by the U.S. census standards, the six county area this shelter serves possesses many of the characteristics related to rural citizenship that have been shown to be problematic for women seeking protective orders. Cases like these are important in looking at rural protective order problems (Logan, et al., 2005). Furthermore, this facility has high standards and high quality of care. They are indeed utilizing innovative ways of assisting in the PO process that should be known to the research community.
Policy/Practical Implications

These findings have application for policy makers, actors in the criminal justice system, as well as “common” persons. Since empowerment is well established in literature as important to women, this research fulfills the existing need for constant questioning and accountability of the criminal justice system on whether or not it is empowering to marginalized groups. As a student of feminist criminology, I think that listening to the experiences of women who have attempted the PO process is the best way to assess this. Additionally, this research should be helpful to the shelter from which participants were solicited. The staff members there share in my common interest of safety for battered women. The conclusions of the interview data are a positive critique for their methods of counseling as well as their programming. It is certainly a positive outcome for them if they are able to use these positive critiques in considering the future of the shelter as well as applying for various funding opportunities to continue their victim services and community educational efforts.

Areas of Weakness

While my sample and this discussion do represent a marginalized group, the study is largely uninformed in terms of important groups of people that were not included in the sample. I only interviewed females who were abused by males. I was unable to interview any females or males abused by female intimate partners. Also, because of language barriers, I was unable to interview some of the Spanish speaking women who receive services from the shelter. Although the shelter’s director offered to have one of her bilingual workers translate, the interview transcript included so many questions
regarding the shelter that I thought having an employee of the shelter present would
greatly jeopardize the victim's ability to speak freely.

Possible Future Projects

One commonality in the interviews involved the problems women had with
getting the various provisions listed on the protective order regarding childcare, housing
and transportation addressed during the hearings. In considering this problem, I also
recall that most of these women were in court with a representative from the shelter. The
question that remains unanswered is whether the judges in this area know that those
needs are being taken care of or assume so because the petitioners are there with a shelter
representative or whether the shelter sees that these needs are not addressed anywhere in
the PO process and therefore have programs that help in these areas. Furthermore, while
the shelter is enormously helpful to victims in assisting with their needs, I wonder if this
is taking the weight off of the courts in such a way that they have come to think that the
provisions listed on the PO never need to be addressed. If so, what kind of position does
that put petitioners who do not have access to DSAOC in? Does the confidence that the
judges have in the shelter (if any) to take care of victims lead to a more bureaucratic
demeanor in that they know they do not have to meet these needs? In order to answer
these questions and look more into their area, future projects might include courtroom
observation, a community attitudes survey to assess the shelter's coverage area compared
to other areas with similar characteristics, interviews with the shelter workers and judges
in this area, along with observations of final PO hearings where the petitioners are with
shelter representatives as well as comparative analysis between hearings when they
appear on their own or interviews with women who applied for POs who were not
involved with DSAOC. Knowing the attitudes of judges and the community members about DV would be a nice compliment to these data.

Additionally, I would like to look more into the role of children in seeking protection from the courts to domestic violence. The "failure to protect" laws, in particular, are interesting as currently only four states have laws addressing this and other states are developing policies concerning it (Hartley, 2004). I would find it interesting to further investigate such policies and see how victims of domestic violence are responding to and navigating within such constraints.

Altogether, this study was a very useful exploration into the PO process for these rural victims of domestic violence. It seems that while the limited previous literature reflects on domestic violence in rural contexts as largely problematic, these women found their rural connections useful at times. Additionally, as predicted, the participants saw this shelter as both highly effective and innovative in finding ways to empower DV victims during the PO process. These findings, along with future offspring data should inform the larger research community.
REFERENCES


Iowa Judicial Code (2003). Section 236. Domestic Abuse Act (Sections 236.2, 236.3, 236.3A, Form 4.1, 236.4, 236.5, 236.6, 236.12, 236.14, 236.8, 236.10, 236.20).


completion of the restraining order process in female victims of partner violence.

*Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15* (10) 1081-1099.
Interview steps

1. As victim enters the room or as we meet, I will introduce myself and ask if she would like to accompany me to the interview site (unless we are already there).

2. I will explain why I am doing this interview. “I am interested in the PO process for victims of domestic violence. I will ask you questions about the paperwork, filing, anyone who helped you such as an advocate or other shelter worker, judges”

3. I will inform the participant that “You are welcome to decline to answer any question you are asked, to change the subject at any time and to end the interview at any time. Here is the 15 dollars promised to you so that you are compensated for your time so that you can feel free to leave at any time.”

4. I will try to build trust by explaining my agenda and say that “I am interested in getting an overall view of how the process was from your perspective. Hopefully, research like this will eventually inform policy makers to improve the process in ways that further enable safety of other people in similar situations”

5. I will ensure confidentiality by stating that “All information that you give to me will remain completely confidential. In reporting my findings, I will use no names and the results will be presented in generalities. Any quotes will be used in such a way that your identity is unrecognizable to anyone who may read it. Your interview is confidential even to the shelter workers although they will receive a copy of my final report.”

6. I will try to ensure her emotionally safety by explaining that “I will not be asking you specific questions about your victimization and if you ever feel the need to talk further about your abuse there is a staff here wholly dedicated to helping you in any way they can”

7. I will inform them of how long this may take “I estimate that this interview will take between 30 minutes and an hour but if you wish to cut it short that is fine” (the interview may also be shorter if the participant did not complete the PO process, but I am equally interested in these women’s stories).

8. I will show them the recording equipment. “This is the recorder, and I will turn it on in a minute, after you have heard the consent form.”

9. I will read aloud the “Consent of a Responsible Adult” form. If they chose to proceed, I will ask for verbal permission. I will read the following script:

"Please say ‘yes’ after the following statements if you are in agreement:

- “The purpose and requirements of this research has been read and explained to me.”
- “I would like to participate in this research.”

This verbal consent will indicate the participant’s agreement to participate in the interview. The participants will be given a copy of the “Consent of a Responsible Adult” form.

10. Interview Outline
“Q” indicates an overview statement of a line of questioning that will be read in the interview.
“•” indicates possible questions to be included under a line of questioning

Basic Demographic Information

Q: What is your current age?
Q: What racial/ethnic group do you identify with?
Q: What level of education have you achieved?
Q: It is my understanding that this shelter serves Fort Dodge as well as outlying rural areas. Do you live in a town? How big? Country? Which county?

Questions about the Protection Order Process

Q: I would like to talk to you about your initial decision to apply for a PO...
  • How long ago? Are you still in the process? Finished? Have an active PO?
  • What gave you the idea to apply for a PO? (Shelter worker? Pamphlet?)
  • What was your motive (hope/rationale) for filing for a PO?
  • What was your first step? How did you go about it?
  • Did you face obstacles when you first decided to get a PO? (ie: transportation, cost, time, increased violence, childcare, fear, safety concerns?)
  • Did you receive any help with forms?
  • Did you receive an emergency, temporary order that day?
  • Did this first part of the process seem easy? Difficult?

Q: I would like to talk to you about court, if you had to go the courthouse in the PO process...
  • Did you go to a courthouse? Which one? Rural/Urban?
  • Did someone go to court with you/give you transportation?
  • Was there a hearing?
  • How do you feel about the treatment you received by court personnel/judges?
  • Was the experience difficult? Easy? Costly?

Q: I would like to talk to you about the actual protective order (have a current application there to refer to if they would like to).
  • Did you see/need the option to check for provisions? (money, child care, housing) If so, did you ask for consideration of these options by checking these boxes? (there are boxes to check on the application)
  • Did you have financial/employment/housing/child care needs at that time? Were these addressed in the hearing?
  • How did this process affect your time/job? Did you have to take time off of work?
  • If received a final order, did you feel that these provisions helped? If not, what could be done to help?

Q: Lets talk about how what the PO accomplished for you...
  • Did the PO have the desired effect? What was good/bad about the process?
  • Did things change for you after you received the PO?

Q: I am interested in how you feel about the process...
  • Are there any ways you think the process should be improved? What were you hoping for in a PO? Did you get what you were hoping for?
• Was there anything or any person that was particularly helpful to you during the PO process?
11. After the interview make reflective notes in my notebook.
APPENDIX B

LETTER TO CLIENTS TO SOLICIT PARTICIPATION
December 5, 2005
Dear Domestic/Sexual Assault Outreach Center clients:
I am a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Western Michigan University under the direction of Professor Angela Moe. I am conducting a research study on the protective order process. I would like to gather information on the protective order process in Iowa and the benefits and challenges it poses to those who attempt to get a protective order as a response to domestic violence.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your participation in this study. In order to participate, you will be asked to complete a face to face interview at the Domestic/Sexual Assault Outreach Center. This interview could last up to an hour. You will receive $15 in cash for your participation.

All interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. I will be responsible for transcription and analysis of the interviews. All interview transcripts will remain in a locked file cabinet drawer in my faculty advisor’s (Dr. Angela Moe’s) office at WMU, and the audiotaped version of your interview will be destroyed after it is transcribed. The results of this research study may be published but neither your real name nor any information that may easily identify you will be used. However, I may include some information, such as your age and race/ethnicity, when describing your situation or quoting you in my writings, but I will not do so when using such information along with your story would put you at risk of being identified.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty (i.e., it will not affect your participation in the programs and services provided by DSAOC, and you will still receive $15 in cash, even if you do not complete the entire interview).

Prior to our interview, I will discuss this research further with you and ask you to give your verbal consent (agreement) to participate. I will provide you with a copy of a consent form which will provide more information about your involvement in this research. A copy of this consent form is attached to this letter for your review. Your verbal statement will be considered your consent to participate.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please call me at (816) 721-1598, or my faculty advisor, Dr. Angela Moe at (269) 387-5275. If you would like to schedule an appointment to be interviewed, please tell the shelter worker who gave you the information about this project and they will give you an opportunity to contact me by phone.

Sincerely,
Traci Ketter
816-721-1598
APPENDIX C

SHELTER WORKERS’ SCRIPT
The shelter workers will use the following script in recruitment, as well as hand potential subjects a letter with instructions so they can contact the researcher if they are interested in learning more about participating in the study:

1. “An opportunity is available for you to participate in a research project addressing the protective order process in Iowa. The researcher would like to talk with you individually about your experiences in the PO process. The only requirement is that you started the PO process by filling out or having an advocate help you fill out a temporary no contact order application. You do not have to have received a PO. The attempt does have to be in response to a physically violent intimate partner. The interview will be conducted at the DSAOC shelter and will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour. Participation will in no way affect the services you receive from the shelter and its programs. Are you interested in learning more?”

Next, if someone says “yes” they will be given the instruction letter using the script below. If someone indicates “no” the worker will continue on with the counseling session or other meeting for which they were together.

2. “Here is an instructional cover letter with information about your involvement and risks and benefits of your possible participation. Also, here is the researcher’s phone number. If you wish to call her now, you can use one of the phones here.” (worker hands potential subject the informational cover letter, client reads the letter or worker reads it to her).

As instructed in the cover letter, if they wish to participate, the participant will be given access to a telephone in order to contact researcher by phone in order to set up an interview, or the subject can contact the researcher at another time. Any long distance charges accrued by the shelter will be covered by the student researcher with the funds granted by the Kercher Center for Social Research. The shelter worker will proceed with the following script to find out if the client would like to use the phone:

3. “Would you like to use a phone here to call?”

There will be no follow up if someone declines to participate or indicates that they do not wish to use the phone there at that time. The shelter workers will be instructed not to push women into participation in any way.
APPENDIX D

LEARNING FEMINIST METHODS: PERSONAL NOTES
This section is a narrative describing my experiences in doing qualitative, feminist research for my master's thesis. After completing the master's degree coursework that would seemingly prepare me for my thesis research, I would like to reflect on my experience in learning how to do qualitative work during the process of my thesis since I felt like after I completed the master's degree coursework, I was more comfortable and practiced at using quantitative methods than qualitative. Furthermore, in looking back on that time with even the somewhat limited perspective I have now, I can say with confidence that I was absolutely clueless when it came to understanding what feminist research is about. This type of narrative may be useful for someone who is new to the qualitative process (as one may encounter some of these thoughts as he or she proceeds) as well as those who are veterans to qualitative, feminist research (as they may have become so comfortable with this type of work that it has become second nature and therefore difficult to instruct to qualitative newcomers). I would like to simply explain through this project chronologically and offer some insights along the way related to qualitative research and feminist circles. I will begin from the beginning of this project, when I switched from a more quantitatively focused project to domestic violence (DV) research and specifically, to restraining orders.

After having a proposal prepared and a lot of work done on a quantitative project that I had been working on, the door closed to that data. The timing of this worked out well for me since I had been being drawn to DV research for quite some time. I have noticed a certain allure to this kind of work to some people; one is simply drawn to it as I was drawn to this project. Knowing little about what I wanted to do other than that I was
interested in protective orders and domestic violence, I had another important door opened for me. A good friend of mine told me that his mother was the director of a shelter for victims of domestic and sexual assault in Iowa. He informed me that this shelter serves a six county, mostly rural area. I was later invited to go to their annual fund raiser and stay in the family’s home. This is where one of the most important relationships for this project began, my relationship with my friend’s mother, Joyce, the shelter director. I have since developed a great relationship with Joyce and she given me open access to her clients, staff, advocates, volunteers, her home and the shelter. This really allowed me a rare opportunity in DV research. I have appreciated this opportunity to go where the literature has led me as I read and developed research questions. It seems that others in this area are often somewhat constrained by stringent limitations from the agency as to what kind of research they can do and when they can do it.

This leads me to my first observation. As the saying goes, “its not what you know but who you know.” I do not completely believe this but it rung true in a way with this project as I was given atypical access to a shelter and its clients and was welcomed into the agency by the staff, having developed this relationship with the shelter’s director who is highly supportive of my research. Fortunately, she sees us both as players on a team, both trying to understand and make steps toward the elimination violence against women. I think I may have given up quickly had I not had the right connections. It seems that there is somewhat of a collaborative spirit about the feminists I have run into, both academics and practitioners. So, while I might not have had the experiential tools to do a project like this, I had the teachers (Joyce and Angie) who were willing to bring me alongside them and show me the way. I have observed and experienced that this kind of
open access is not always available with other mentors in and outside of academia but forward thinking and generous mentors opened the door for progress; I am appreciative of their stances and the resulting treatment I received.

Continuing chronologically through my story, I was reading the literature, developing research questions about obstacles in obtaining protective orders for victims of domestic violence and had moved onto methods. How was I going to answer these questions that I had? I knew that I needed to talk to the victims themselves. At this point, I was still so predisposed to quantitative methods that as I started to develop an interview script, I was naturally trying to think of ways to quantify it. One night, I stayed up all night trying to think of every possible response to every question and more questions contingent on those responses so that I could design a computer program based on this huge (huge!) tree that I made that I thought could replace the face to face interview. I did not see the value in the face to face conversation. I just didn’t get it! I realize now that nothing can replace that face to face interaction. This, I realized only after a gentle explanation from Angie that while that sounded interesting, that was not exactly what doing feminist research was about. But at the time, I thought it was a fantastic idea. As long as I could think of every possible response, I did not understand why Angie did not understand how effective this was going to be!

My insight here is this- I did not see the qualitative process as legitimate. While I understood that qualitative research was “good,” and had read good results, I did not really understand the process and how those results were developed. In all honesty, I saw qualitative work as being “easier” than quantitative work, something for people who weren’t smart enough for statistics. Now I laugh at that notion as I remember trying to
transcribe my interviews and realizing the difficulty of that and other qualitative processes. The still unanswered question that occurred to me was where did I get that notion, that qualitative research is easier?

Continuing through the process, I had a proposal, I had a data collection site, I had my field journal and I was ready to go. It seemed that only HSIRB and my prospectus meeting would stand in my way. Based on the encouragement from Angie that I was ready, I made the trip to face all of the critics (or at least I thought they would be critics). It is a good thing that I trust her otherwise I may have never done it! Many authors in academia reflect on how they go through their entire careers trying to escape the discovery by their colleagues that they are not as smart or good or well-prepared as everyone thinks they are. I could definitely relate to this struggle of legitimization as I apprehensively approached the IRB and prospectus meetings, feeling altogether illegitimate. I thought... “this is it.” I have been fooling people this whole time, all through my coursework, and this is where I will be exposed. If not these three professors whom I respect enormously, then surely the twelve member, frowning HSIRB of computer scientists, biologists and mathematicians will discover me.

As I unexpectedly made it through both of these meetings, getting approval contingent on a few changes from both, I still thought “are you sure?!” I still thought I was fooling everyone. I came away feeling encouraged that everyone approved of where the research was headed but still questioning the legitimacy of the process, thinking, “They’re really going to let me do this?...They think I’m qualified to talk to these women?... I must have fooled them again!” Finally, after processing through all of this, I re-read my HSIRB protocol and my thesis proposal and realized something quite
important... I never lied! This was legit! This may be a seemingly small discovery yet it was one of the more important times for me personally.

My insight to this point is more of a question I would like to pose as I do not remember having these kinds of feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt when I was developing my HSIRB proposal for my other, more quantitatively focused (although mixed methods were available) thesis project. I do not think this had to do with a greater risk to subjects but I just felt that the statistical analysis was an altogether more acceptable, legitimate, and “smart” thing for a researcher to be doing. All the way to the extent that I had convinced myself that I must have lied at some point for HSIRB to be letting me do this. This might have something to do with experience as I had been well affirmed throughout my coursework that I did know how to do various types of statistical procedures and analyses. While classroom experiences can never completely prepare one for research in the field, I think there is a lot to be said for time spent studying and learning how others have done their research, reading methodology literature and practicing data analysis of various kinds. While I feel like I got a great education, I do think it may have been skewed toward quantitative methods a bit. In order to educate students, I would like to see a required qualitative methods class for the master’s program (although I am no problem solver because I cannot think of a class I think could be eliminated!). This would help enormously for those who go on to do qualitative thesis projects as I think that if students themselves are not comfortable with their research, we cannot expect skeptics from other departments to be assured that their research is trustworthy.
Moving along, I proceeded, thinking ‘well if a board of three other sociologists and twelve other professors from other departments think I am ready, maybe they are right, which brought me to the actual interviews. Over a two week time period, I did face to face interviews with 17 victims of domestic violence who were referred from the Domestic and Sexual Assault Outreach Center (DSAOC) in Fort Dodge, Iowa. In going there and beginning to set up interviews, I still had to talk myself into it so I would not be a nervous wreck. I would think to myself, “This is a conversation between two women. You can relate to many of her struggles. You know what you are doing, and remember…you never lied! If these people think you are prepared, you must be prepared.” I was overwhelmed with affirmation to find that as soon as the first interview began, I immediately felt completely at home, having flashbacks to all the articles and books I had read, thinking, “Right! Yes! and Mmmm, classic.” This leads me to my next realization about feminist DV and PO research which is that the literature in this area for me was right on target. It was in touch with the population and pragmatically valuable. I was pointed to just the right literature by my advisor and was prepared to ask just the right follow up questions when the time came and I was getting quality information as a result.

As I proceeded with the interviews, I was further impressed by the utility of these interviews for the women. Angie had always said that one of the possible benefits for the clients would be that they might find it useful or gain knowledge or insight as they discussed the information with me. I had been somewhat suspicious of qualitative interviews in the past. I thought that the interview questions may have led the interviewees to respond in certain ways. The process of doing these interviews proved
otherwise. There seemed to be a therapeutic effect on these women just by going through their stories. They would gain new realizations about their stories that I did not have to lead them into. They enjoyed reflecting on the services they received from the shelter and what they thought about POs. They especially seemed to enjoy my regarding them as the experts they are. This was an affirmation for me that this process is good and productive.

Here is one example from the interviews. As I was exploring some aspects of rural life that might affect the protective order process, one such case (Abby) went something like, “Let’s talk about your experiences with the police…” She said “I’ve always had good experiences with the police.” I say “Good experiences?” she says “Yeah, since my brother is one of the two cops in this town,” without thinking much of it. I simply repeated back, ”Your brother is one of two?…” She thought a minute and said, “Yeah, I guess that would be quite opposite if it were reversed and it were his brother.” In many other instances, it seemed that women would similarly gain perspective and understanding of their own situations just by going through it in a slightly different way than they previously had.

Hearing their own words repeated back to them caused them to rethink their assumptions and it was almost always a positive experience for them and they were all very happy to talk to me about their experiences, just happy to have someone else listen to them. Another woman, during the process of the interview, realized her main complaint with the judicial process was that she to state her address out loud in court to the judge, thus letting her abuser know where she was staying. In both of these cases, it took a conversation to make this happen and neither would have listed it on a survey or a
computer program. Each woman is unique and while I was well versed in the types of problems they may encounter, nothing could have prepared me for every possible answer. Additionally, I think that having a computer program repeat your own words back to you would be horribly patronizing. So, the point here is that I was totally comfortable hearing all the scenarios and was, in fact, quite prepared from having read the literature and methodology texts. This is yet another affirmation of the qualitative process and its value.

I was even prepared for the instances that cannot be prepared for in that I was warned of the types of problematic scenarios that might present themselves. Even though I was told that this kind of research was emotionally affecting, I could never have predicted how this experience would affect my way of thinking. I did not realize that I would relate so much to these women. In hearing them tell their stories, I did not see their lives as so very different than my own. Since I have never had the feeling of terror that they experienced, I cannot say that I can wholly relate to them but know that my perspective was dramatically altered. I found this fascinating as I reflected on women’s lives and considered how I would draw conclusions from this. It has been important to monitor my own thoughts, feelings, assumptions and the changes in each of these as the process has manifest.

Another situation I was warned of so that I could recognize it when it was happening but could not quite figure out how to avoid was the two and a half hour interview (when most were taking about an hour). This seemed like it was going to be the longest transcript with least amount of pertinent discussion. I had read about and prepared myself for this to happen but until I experienced it, I could not have known how
to handle someone who wanted to talk at me for as long as possible about everything under the sun. It seemed at first that no matter how skilled I thought I was at conversation by that time, I could not get her to say anything that answered my questions. It was certainly a learning experience. However, since I had read about instances such as this and I knew it was coming, I did not get upset with myself or upset with her in any way and ended up with a great amount of pertinent discussion. My thought on this is simply another case of the quality of literature in this area and the higher quality of data I was able to obtain because of journals, books and forums such as this where I was able to learn about others’ experiences. So, while I mentioned earlier that more coursework in this area could have helped me, nothing can replace the mentoring professor, the literature and wonderful activists in the shelters and communities.

Finally, I would like to reflect on my relationship with my thesis advisor. She had to coach me in feminist methods and keep me from drifting back to the tendency I had to quantify everything. All of this at the same time as I was trying to engage in the research process, not confident in myself as a qualitative researcher yet trying to actively engage my project and do quality research as well as defend my project against an HSIRB review board that did not seem to understand the essence of feminist methods or semi-structured interviewing. Having been through the process before on other projects, she paved the way for me with the HSIRB and had helpful strategies for order and wording. Most of all, I think she did the only thing one can do, which was to encourage me to pursue my research interests and to facilitate the process. I feel enormously blessed by the community of feminist researchers. This work is real, practical, and meaningful.
APPENDIX E

HSIRB RESEARCH PROTOCOL CLEARANCE
Date: November 23, 2005

To: Angela Moe, Principal Investigator
    Traci Ketter, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 05-10-09

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “The Protective Order Process for Victims of Domestic Violence” has been approved under the full category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 19, 2006