Confronting ‘Victim’ Discourses: The Identity Work of Battered Women

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In this article I explore how battered women both draw from and reject victim discourses in their processes of self-construction and self-representation. Data gathered from semistructured interviews with forty women who experienced violence from an intimate partner in a heterosexual relationship demonstrate that available “victim” discourses are both enabling and constraining. Four common representations of a victim emerged as most influential to women’s identity work: as someone who suffers a harm she cannot control; as someone who deserves sympathy and/or requires some type of action be taken against the victimizer; as someone who is culpable for her experiences; and as someone who is powerless and weak. “Victim empowerment” and “survivor” discourses also played a role in how women understood and made sense of their experiences. In their attempts to construct identities for themselves, battered women become caught between notions of victimization, agency, and responsibility.

“I hate to be called a victim. I feel like then it’s my fault. Then it’s like I’m this weak person that couldn’t do things right and get out [of an abusive relationship], you know?”

This was the response given by Gina—a woman I met through a counseling group at a shelter for battered women—when I asked whether she saw herself as a “victim.” Because she has experienced physical, verbal, and emotional abuse from her husband, some people might perceive her as a victim. However, while Gina believed that she had been wronged by her husband, she herself rejected such an identity because she assigned it negative connotations. She did not want to be perceived by others as weak, helpless, or culpable for her husband’s behavior. Current cultural discourses surrounding violence against women commonly depict them as blameworthy or as weak and powerless. As a result, many abused women have a difficult time using available victim discourses to articulate their experiences and construct and present selves that are meaningful to them.
Gubrium and Holstein (2001), drawing from Foucault, discuss how discourse constructs subjectivity, focusing particularly on how this process occurs in the context of social institutions. They argue that institutions produce “institutional identities,” which are “locally salient images, models, or templates for self-construction; they serve as resources for structuring selves” (p. 11). For Gubrium and Holstein, institutional identities become particularly relevant when people try to construct their selves using a troubled identity, such as “drug addict,” “criminal,” or “victim.” Loseke (2001) employs the term identity work to describe the process whereby people categorize themselves and their lived experiences in terms of a particular “troubled” identity. She argues that because troubles in peoples’ lived experiences “tend to be unpredictable in emergence, irregular in profession, ambiguous in meaning, and uncertain in development,” identity work is often a complex and messy process (p. 107).

In this article I first explore how various social institutions have discursively constructed the victim of domestic violence. Then, using data gathered from semi-structured interviews, I explore the identity work of forty women who experienced violence from an intimate partner in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Specifically, I examine the conditions under which women claimed or rejected the identity of victim. As I demonstrate, victim discourses both assisted and hindered women in their processes of self-construction and self-representation. The women I interviewed found it difficult to depict themselves as injured or wronged while acknowledging they were not passive or helpless. Additionally, when telling their stories, many of the women expressed a belief that they were somehow partially responsible for their partners’ violence. I argue that this expression of responsibility does not mean that the women blamed themselves for the violence they experienced, but instead both reflects current “victim empowerment” discourses and represents the women’s attempts to imply that they have some measure of control over their lives.

CONSTRUCTING THE “VICTIM” OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Following Holstein and Miller 1997, I conceive of victimization as an “interactional phenomenon.” Under an interactionist framework, the social processes through which a person is categorized a victim become central. People are not inherently victims, but rather victim status is “conferred upon them as they are interpreted, organized, and represented through social interaction” (p. 26). Victimization provides “interpretive instructions” that dictate how a victim should be perceived. Further, as Dunn (2001:287) argues, claims of victimization “take place within a historical, cultural, and organizational context shaped by multiple perspectives on what it means to be a ‘true’ victim.” For example, according to Loseke (2003), in the United States someone is categorized as a “victim” only when others perceive that person to be deserving of sympathy. She offers the following characteristics of people who are most often deemed as worthy of sympathy: (1) people who are not responsible for the harm they experience; (2) people who are evaluated as moral; and (3) people in exceptionally troublesome conditions (pp. 78–79). Help is
therefore reserved for “morally good people” who “are greatly harmed through no fault of their own” (p. 79).

Thus the assigning or claiming of a victim identity—and, consequently, the receipt of sympathy and assistance—is strongly tied both to existing public constructions of victims and to how individuals derive meaning from these constructions. In the following sections, I present a brief history of victim discourses and outline current debates surrounding the term *victim*. Then, more specifically, I discuss how popular discourses have represented victims of domestic violence. Finally, I consider the creation of the identity of survivor.

**Current Victim Debates**

Situating the construction of victims of domestic violence within broader victim discourses is necessary to fully understand cultural meanings surrounding the term *victim*. Public conversations about victimization in the United States began in the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced by forces such as the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, an increased focus on crime response and control, and the growth of the mental health profession (Best 1997). According to Best (1997), since this time an “ideology of victimization” has developed, fueling a “victim industry” that has mass-produced a large array of different types of victims. Best argues that major institutions such as law, the medical and therapeutic professions, academia, the mass media, and the recovery movement all provide “considerable institutional support for the ideology of victimization” (p. 14).

Increased public discussion and recognition of different types of victims have not come without debate, however. In recent years, victimization has been described as both “fashionable” (Best 1997) and “in crisis” (Gavey 1999). Some have suggested that victim ideology has created the notion that “everyone’s a victim,” obscuring the pain and anguish that “real” victims suffer (Lamb 1996:20). Feminist research on date rape and rape victims has drawn particular criticism from those who argue that claims of women’s victimization have been greatly exaggerated (see Gavey 1999). Others, as Best (1997:9) discusses, have argued that the increase in claims of victimization “threatens basic assumptions about personal responsibility that are fundamental to the social order.”

Indeed, debates over victimization are often centered on issues of blame and responsibility. Traditional victimology, for example, originated in the 1970s as a study of the “criminal-victim relationship” (McLear 1998). Some victimologists “have suggested that criminal incidents be viewed as the results of a process of interaction between (at least) two parties to explain why a particular offender harmed a particular victim at a particular time and place” (Karmen 1990:103). This perspective has been criticized, however, by those who believe that it comes dangerously close to blaming victims of crime. Feminist activists have been particularly concerned with suggestions that victims play a role in their victimization in light of the historical tendency in the United States of blaming female victims of male-perpetrated violence.
Representations of Battered Women

Like other forms of victimization, domestic violence was not widely recognized as a serious social problem until the early 1970s (Pleck 1987; Schechter 1982). Prior to the 1970s, the criminal justice system referred to domestic violence as a "domestic disturbance," and social service organizations termed it "family maladjustment" (Pleck 1987:182). This perspective portrayed women as partially, if not completely, accountable for any violence they experienced at the hands of a spouse. As Schechter (1982) demonstrates, "victim provocation" theories—advocated by social institutions such as academia, the criminal justice system, and medical and social service organizations—argued that abused women needed and caused violence in their relationships for their own psychological well-being. Because the public viewed abused women as responsible for any violence they experienced in the context of an intimate relationship, they were commonly not recognized as victims and were often unable to receive needed legal and social assistance (Pleck 1982; Schechter 1982).

Rooted in the second-wave of the feminist movement, the battered women's movement originated in the early 1970s. Explicitly political, the movement began to raise consciousness and make public problems such as physical and sexual violence that were once thought of as a woman's individual, private concern (Schechter 1982). Thus, at this time, many different women—including feminists, community activists, professionals, and women who had been battered—"increasingly responded in a new way [to battering], providing emotional support, refuge and a new definition of 'the problem'" (p. 56). This new definition characterized battering as a serious social concern and depicted victims of abuse as not responsible for the violence they experienced.

Many researchers have argued that constructing a unified image of battered women helped victim advocates and claims-makers to establish the seriousness and severity of domestic violence in the 1970s (Davies 1998; Ferraro 1996; Loseke 1992). According to Davies (1998) and Loseke (1992), members of the early battered women's movement attempted to convince both the public and policymakers that battering was a serious problem that affected many different women. Because both professional and popular understandings of domestic violence often portrayed battered women as culpable for the violence they experienced, advocates and claims-makers needed to construct a more sympathetic public image of the "battered woman" (Davies 1998; Loseke 1992). Domestic violence discourse thus became centered on the image of the battered woman that Davies (1998) terms the "pure victim."
The pure victim model depicts battered women as wives who adhere to traditional gender roles and are economically and emotionally dependent on their abusers. Further, this framing portrays battered women as passive and not violent themselves, except in self-defense. Advocates present the abuse that battered women experience “as a pattern of events that necessarily increase in severity and frequency, and that will only get worse unless someone intervenes” (Davies 1998:15). Finally, the pure victim model describes battered women as extremely fearful from, if not terrified by, the abuse they experience.

Lamb (1999) argues that advocacy groups construct not just battered women in this manner, but female victims of all types of male-perpetrated abuse, including rape and sexual harassment. She demonstrates that psychologists, researchers, therapists, feminists, victims’ rights organizations, the media, activists, and survivor groups paint an image of the victim as a woman who is “pure, innocent, blameless and free of problems” before the abuse began, but is extremely traumatized and greatly suffers after the abuse takes place (p. 108). This typification assumes that victims experience problems such as depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, phobias, addictions, dissociative identity disorder, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and post-traumatic stress disorder (p. 111).

Similar to Davies (1998) and Loseke (1992), Lamb (1999) argues that advocacy groups created this image of victims in an attempt to garner public sympathy and counter previous discourses that blamed the victim. Therapists and victim advocates wished to avoid minimizing abuse and any potential harm it produced, as minimization of abuse was common by perpetrators and other members of society. As Lamb maintains, it seemed as if the only way the public would recognize the severity of the problem of victimization was by believing that abuse leads to severe psychological distress.

While theorists such as Davies (1998) and Lamb (1999) are critical of mainstream images of victims, they are not claiming that no victimized women’s experiences match the public constructions of battered women and victims. Rather, they maintain that assuming all victimized women’s experiences are parallel with those described in these constructions is problematic, as women’s reactions to abuse vary. Further, they argue that because dominant constructions assume that the experiences of all abused women are similar, they also fail to account for the varied contexts of women’s lives shaped by structural factors such as race, culture, and class. Theorists such as Crenshaw (1994) and Kanuha (1996) have argued for the importance of paying attention to the multiple oppressions many battered women face, something dominant constructions of battered women do not do.

Victim Empowerment and Becoming a “Survivor”

While images of a helpless and passive victim were meant to counter discourses that depicted battered women as culpable for the abuse they experienced, blaming the victim still occurs, albeit in different forms. While theories that explicitly blame
abused women by maintaining that they intentionally caused domestic violence are uncommon today, a tendency to focus on women's decisions to leave or stay in their abusive relationships is still evident. As Mahoney (1994:5) states, "The question 'why didn't she leave?' shapes both social and legal inquiry on battering." Mahoney (1992:1305) maintains that such a question focuses attention "on the individual who was harmed and the reasons she acted in a particular way, rather than on the person who sought power and control abusively." Thus the focus on "exit" implicitly holds women responsible for ending the violence in their relationship. Because there exists a cultural expectation that battered women should leave their abusive relationships, if they fail to do so they are seen as ultimately at fault for the future violence they may experience.

Legal work with battered women is organized around a false dichotomy between victimization and agency (Schneider 1993)—a dichotomy that characterizes popular understandings of battered women, as well. Schneider maintains that while an awareness of women's experiences as victims is "necessary and important," a sole focus on women's victimization is "incomplete and limiting because it ignore[s] women's active efforts to protect themselves and their children, and to mobilize their resources to survive" (p. 389). However, as she continues, "an exclusive focus on women's agency, reflected in the emphasis on why the women ha[ve] not left the battering relationship, [is] shaped by liberal visions of autonomy, individual action, and individual control and mobility" that she finds to be "equally unsatisfactory without the larger context of victimization" (p. 389).

Berns (2004) demonstrates how the notions of personal responsibility and individual action and control have become central to public discussions of domestic violence. Many magazine articles and talk shows utilize what Berns terms a "victim empowerment" model of framing domestic violence that, while sympathetic to victims, holds them responsible for solving the problem of violence in their lives. Berns states that battered women "are told to find solutions within themselves: 'Change your personality.' 'Increase your self-esteem.' 'Take control of your life.' 'Refuse to be a victim.' 'You have the power to end the abuse'" (p. 55). Thus domestic violence is understood by many people to be a private problem of the victim.

The term survivor has also emerged in the past several decades as an alternative identity to that of victim. In the late 1970s, Kathleen Barry (1979:39) was one of the first theorists to introduce the concept of female victims of abuse (in this case, rape) "surviving" by stating that "more than victims, women who have been raped or sexually enslaved are survivors. Surviving is the other side of being a victim. It involves will, action, initiative on the victim's part." While the label victim carries "negative connotations of being damaged, passive, and powerless" (Best 1997:13), the term survivor is viewed by many to be more positive, as it implies qualities such as agency, coping, resistance, decision making, recovery, and survival (Dunn 2005; McLeer 1998). According to Naples (2003:167), the term survivor is "typically reserved for those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of victim.” As she points out, the decision to claim the identity of
survivor may be influenced by a number of factors, such as therapeutic interventions, discussions with others who consider themselves survivors, and other forms of contact with survivor narratives, any of which may lead a woman to reconsider her personal experiences.

Dunn (2005) argues that a survivor identity protects women from the stigma of being a victim, as it connotes attributes that are more culturally valued, such as strength, personal responsibility, and agency. According to Dunn, some of the actions of battered women that were previously viewed as suspect are now viewed in new—and more positive—ways within the “survivor” framework. She states: “In these alternate ways of interpreting the very same behaviors, ‘staying’ becomes the process of women choosing ‘leaving, staying, and returning’ tactics, of women ‘resisting, coping and surviving.’” (p. 21).

In her research on identity work in felony domestic violence stalking cases, Dunn (2001:307) demonstrates that stalking victims and advocates believe that “victims ‘ought’ to transcend their victimization and become survivors in the definitional process.” However, claiming a survivor identity comes with a cost, and Dunn found that the stalking victims in her study had to present as credible victims in their interactions with the criminal justice system in order to be taken seriously. When the women assumed a survivor identity, they risked having their victimhood called into question. As Dunn concludes, “If the essence of victimization is the claim that one is not responsible, then to have responsibility returned is in some sense to take on blame” (p. 310). One cannot simultaneously be a passive victim and an agentic survivor.

Because victim assignments are always open-ended, they may be sites of contestation and negotiation. As Holstein and Miller (1997:37) state, “Disagreements about assignments of victim status may become conflicts in which the assignments are openly disputed. Both injury and responsibility may be at stake in such disputes.” Battered women who fail to show that they are “true” victims risk losing access to services offered by the criminal justice system, shelters, and other social service organizations (Dunn 2001; Loseke 1992). However, because mainstream victim discourses have often constructed the victim in problematic ways, battered women who are labeled “true” victims may also incur unwanted costs. Further, while a survivor identity alleviates some of the stigma of victimization, as I have shown, it is not problem free.

Battered women commonly have numerous opportunities to become familiar with the discourses I have just outlined. They may encounter them through consuming various types of media, staying at emergency shelters, attending support groups, talking with friends and family members, and interacting with various law enforcement officials and criminal justice system professionals. Given the complexities of victim and survivor discourses, how do battered women use them in self-construction and representation? In what situations do they choose to identify as victims? As survivors? As neither? According to Fraser (1997:152), “People’s social identities are complexes of meanings, networks of interpretation” and descriptions
that are "drawn from the fund of interpretive possibilities available to agents in specific societies." Existing cultural narratives about victims and survivors exist as resources from which battered women can draw in their attempts to understand themselves. However, as my research illustrates, the tension between victimization and agency inherent in these narratives influences battered women's identity claims and contributes to their struggles with self-construction and representation.

METHODS AND DATA

The data in this study are drawn from in-depth, semistructured interviews with forty women who reported experiencing violence in a heterosexual intimate relationship. I utilize a broad definition of "violence" that includes not just physical abuse but also verbal abuse (including threats of physical violence), and emotional and psychological abuse (see Belknap 2001). Initially, I was interested in exploring battered women's experiences with the criminal justice system. Thus a requirement for participation in the study was prior involvement with the court system as a result of domestic violence.  

The research was conducted primarily in the spring of 2002 in two separate jurisdictions in a western state. To recruit interviewees, I mailed flyers to women shortly after the first phase of their court case concluded in one urban court district; I posted flyers at five different shelters and social service agencies for battered women; and I attended several support group meetings for battered women to briefly discuss my research. Women interested in participating contacted me to discuss the study and possibly schedule a time to meet. I paid each interviewee $30 for her participation to compensate for costs such as child care, time away from work, parking, and/or bus fare.

The interviewees ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty-eight, with a mean age of thirty-two. The sample is racially and ethnically diverse: 57 percent of the women were Caucasian (twenty-three), and 43 percent of the women were African American (eleven), Hispanic (two), Native American (one), or of mixed race (three). The women were not directly asked about their sexual orientation; however, as previously stated, all of the women had been in abusive relationships with men (and one also reported being in an abusive relationship with a woman). The women's annual household incomes ranged from no income (several of the women were homeless and staying at a shelter or living with friends or family) to over $55,000, and the median annual household income was $10,800.

Interviews took place in settings chosen by the participants. I interviewed the majority of women in their homes, but many interviews also took place in public settings, some of which offered more privacy than others. The settings included public library study rooms, meeting rooms of social service organizations, parks, and restaurants or coffee shops. I used both narrative (Riessman 1993) and semistructured interviewing (Mason 1996) approaches. The former allowed me to understand the role of violence in each woman's life and grasp how she made sense of it,
and the latter helped achieve consistency and allow for comparison between the interviewee's answers on specific topics.

I conducted all interviews in person and tape-recorded them, with the interviewees' permission. I began each interview with a series of questions to obtain demographic information (e.g., race, age, income). I then requested that each woman tell me her “story” and discuss the history of her relationship and her experiences with violence. Next, using an interview guide, I asked each woman a range of questions on various topics. I asked the women what the term *victim* meant to them and to discuss whether they saw themselves as a victim. The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to over two hours.

I utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) in my research, meaning that I looked for emergent themes throughout the data collection and analysis. Initially, I was interested in women's experiences with the criminal justice system. As I began the interviews, I noticed that many of the women seemed to claim or reject the identity of victim. Some did both. One of the first women I interviewed repeatedly referred to herself as a victim throughout the interview, yet emphatically explained why she was *not* a victim when directly asked. I was interested in this contradiction and began incorporating questions into the interview process in an attempt to explore the identity claims of the women in more depth. After transcribing each interview, I hand-coded the data and looked for patterns surrounding their references to the identities of “victim” and “survivor.” The women’s failure to consistently claim or reject the identity of victim created challenges in developing conceptual categories and codes. For example, I was unable to make comparisons between women who claimed a victim identity and those who rejected a victim identity, since some women did both. However, by keeping codes “active” during the coding process (Charmaz 2000) and making extensive comparisons within and between interviews, I was finally able to develop an analytic framework that captured the complexity of the data. This framework is centered both on the varied meanings of victim identities that exist culturally and on the social context in which women claimed or rejected a particular identity.

**DISCOURSE AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION**

Four cultural representations of a “victim” emerged as being most influential to the women’s identity work; two of these representations commonly led women to claim a victim identity, and two were most cited as reasons why women rejected a victim identity. Women most often claimed a victim identity to convey they had suffered a harm they could not control and to show that they were deserving of sympathy and reparations. Women most often rejected a victim identity to distance themselves from the notion that they were powerless and weak and to distance themselves from the notion that they were culpable for their experiences. However, this was not always a clear-cut process. Many women simultaneously drew from multiple discourses in their identity work, and their identity claims shifted throughout the interviews.
“I’m Definitely a Victim”: Claiming a Victim Identity

Some women definitively claimed a victim identity at certain times throughout my conversations with them. They used this identity both to demonstrate the harm they had suffered and to show they were worthy of social sympathy and support.

Demonstrating Harm and Deflecting Responsibility

One of the most common uses of the term *victim* is to indicate that a person is the object of “harmful, unfair treatment” (Holstein and Miller 1997:27). This meaning influenced how many of the women I interviewed understood the word, in that they commonly defined a victim as a person who is in some way harmed. Descriptions of a victim included “someone who is afraid,” “someone who has been taken advantage of,” “someone who got abused,” and “someone who has something bad happen to them that they don’t deserve.”

Almost three-quarters of the women indicated that—at least to some degree—they identified with the term *victim* and most often claimed this identity to illustrate that they had somehow been hurt or wronged by their partner. For example, I asked Heather, a thirty-eight-year-old white woman who was verbally and emotionally abused by her boyfriend, what she thought about the term *victim*. She replied, “Well, a victim is someone who got abused and I’m definitely a victim with this situation.” Tammy, a twenty-two-year-old Native American woman whose boyfriend was verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive, said, “I’ve never gone to any... like I’ve never called the victim advocacy program or anything, but I would see myself as a victim. Because, geez, my clothes have been ripped up, my glasses have been broken, [and] my door’s been kicked in.” Despite focusing exclusively on harm to her belongings and property as opposed to bodily harm, Tammy used a victim identity to make clear that she has been mistreated in some way.

A victim label is also often used to deflect responsibility (Holstein and Miller 1997; Karmen 1990; Loseke 2003) and to identify, by implication, a perpetrator or “victimizer” (Holstein and Miller 1997:32). Several of the women with whom I spoke clearly used the identity of victim to convey that the wrong they experienced was caused by someone or something else. Paula, a thirty-seven-year-old white woman who was arrested after her alcoholic husband assaulted her, stated that she felt like a victim, a term she defined as “somebody that reaped the consequences of other people’s actions. Like, at the mercy of whoever, or everybody else, or whatever.” Similarly, Liz, a thirty-six-year-old white woman, made clear who caused her victimization when she said, “I’m a victim. I’m a victim of John. What he is doing is not okay.” These women identify as victims in order to understand—and indicate to others—that their experiences were harmful, damaging, and caused by someone else.

Claiming Rights to Social Response

Holstein and Miller (1997:33) argue that individuals assign the victim label to suggest that a “person deserves help or compensation, while indicating that others
should be sanctioned or provided restitution for harmful occurrences." Indeed, some of the women I interviewed used the victim identity to show that they wanted to see some type of social response to the violence they experienced, in the form of support and assistance for themselves and punishment of their abuser.

Consider the case of Gloria, a thirty-two-year-old African American and Hispanic woman who had a long-term relationship with her boyfriend that turned violent when he developed a drinking problem. She broke up with him after the first time he became verbally abusive. He later returned to her house, broke down the door, pushed her, and threatened to kill both of them. After he was arrested, he broke his probation and fled the state only to have the probation officer go find him and bring him back to the city in which Gloria was living. This meant that as soon as her ex-boyfriend bonded out, he would be back at her house and bothering her (and this is exactly what happened). She recounted a conversation she had with the victim's advocate about this: ‘She [victim's advocate] just told me, she said, ‘Well, Gloria, by law, you know, we have to bring him back up here.’ And I'm, like, ‘But ... that doesn't make any sense, because I'm the victim, and I'm down here, and he's up there where he can't harm me. If you bring him back down here ...’” Here, Gloria's assertion that she is a victim serves to make clear to the victim's advocate that she was the one harmed, that she was still afraid, and that the criminal justice system should be looking out for her best interests.

Similarly, Jean, a forty-three-year-old white woman whose husband kicked her out of the house one night, was very unhappy with what she sees as a lack of social support for battered women. As she remarked, “And it's so weird, 'cause just the other night [at the shelter] we were talking about how women always have to carry the ball, after we're the victims. ... And you know, why do we have to leave the state? Why do we have to change our names and go through all this? We're the victims, we're not the perpetrators.”

Both Gloria and Jean expressed dismay at what they perceive to be a general social failure to address the needs of battered women and believed that social responses to domestic violence rarely take into account the needs and desires of battered women. In these two cases, they use the victim identity to make claims on the criminal justice system (Merry 1995).

"Being a Victim Means It's Your Fault": Rejecting a Victim Identity

At other times, women clearly refused to embrace a victim identity. Women most commonly rejected the victim identity to demonstrate that they were not weak and to avoid being perceived as culpable for the violence they experienced.

Denying Passivity and Weakness

Another common cultural representation of a victim is someone who is passive and powerless (Best 1997; Holstein and Miller 1997; Lamb 1999). This typification influenced how many of these women understood what it means to be a victim.
Women used words such as “weak,” “powerless,” “whiny,” “cowering,” “hopeless,” and “helpless” to describe what the term victim meant to them. Many women chose to reject a victim identity because they did not want to be perceived in these ways.

For example, when I asked Gloria, discussed above, if she saw herself as a victim, she said the following:

The term victim to me means that you’re not able to stand up for yourself and kind of advocate for yourself so that you can make a positive change on whatever’s going on. Like to me, a victim’s sort of, “Oh, God, he’s going to kill me, and I don’t know what to do,” and they’re kind of, like, stuck in the fear mode. And that’s not me. I’m not a victim. I’m afraid—don’t get me wrong—I’m afraid, but I’m not afraid to stand up and do what I think I can do to alleviate the problem.

Gloria saw herself as standing up to her ex-boyfriend and letting him know that she will not tolerate his actions. She broke up with him immediately after he became violent the first time and called the police on him repeatedly when he would show up at her house. Thus, in contrast to seeing herself as powerless, she stated: “I see myself as a person who experienced something and they learned off of it, and they’re trying to go on and fight and do the best thing possible to kind of get it out of their hair.” Gloria’s perception of herself clearly contrasts with her understanding of what it means to be a victim, an identity she rejects.

**Avoiding Blame**

As I have previously discussed, victimization discourses have historically associated victimhood with blame (Karmen 1990). While victim’s advocates and claim-makers have attempted to develop new representations to counter the notion of victim culpability, “blame the victim” discourses still appear to carry much cultural weight. For many of the women I interviewed, the term victim indeed connoted blame. For example, they remarked that “people blame the victim” and “being a victim means it’s your fault.” One woman stated, “If you are a victim of domestic violence, there’s still a stigma that goes with it . . . that you’re a trouble maker, you know . . . that maybe you brought it on yourself.”

Associating the victim status with blame, many of the women rejected the victim identity because they did not want to be perceived as being culpable for the violence they experienced. For example, Laura, a twenty-nine-year-old white woman who was in the midst of divorcing her physically abusive husband at the time of my interview with her, said that to be perceived as a “victim” is “insulting.” She stated,

Something about you know “victims,” and how people are labeled “victims.” . . . it’s like society sort of does an unspoken. . . . I don’t know if it’s just in the way people look at you or respond when you tell them, but . . . it’s like they’re almost blaming you. And I know that that’s not, you know, the case— I’ve seen all the reasons why it’s not my fault. And I understand that, but I don’t think other people do.
Laura said that she understood why her husband’s violence was not her fault, but did not think other people did. She believed that while people may not directly blame abused women, they do it in an “unspoken way.” Understanding that being a victim is “really negative” in our society, Laura did not construct herself in this way.

Victim Struggles

Not surprisingly, women's explanations for claiming or rejecting the victim identity were strongly tied both to the meanings they associated with victim and to their own lived experiences. However, because women often held multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ideas of what it means to be a victim, their identity work became more difficult. As Loseke (2001:108) maintains, “The complexity of lived experience has a way of resisting formulaic presentation.” Some women who understood that discourses often construct victims in demeaning and negative ways still chose to claim a victim identity because it also helped explain their experiences with violence. For example, Ellen, a fifty-six-year-old white woman whose ex-husband was primarily verbally and emotionally abusive while they were married, stated,

And when I think about the word victim, I think about oh, poor me, you know. People blame the victim. They make you feel like all you want to do is whine. And I don't want to whine. I hate it, it takes away any permission to like want to take care of yourself . . . Part of being a victim makes you feel like you’re powerless. And I’m not powerless.

However, despite Ellen’s recognition that victim has been constructed in negative ways, she still claimed the identity, stating, “I am a victim of domestic violence and a victim of emotional violence.” While Ellen clearly recognized that a victim identity is a stigmatized one, she still used it to demonstrate that she had been wronged by her ex-husband.

Other women with multiple understandings of what it means to be a victim both claimed and rejected a victim identity. Gloria, the woman discussed above who rejected a victim identity because she associated victimhood with passivity and inactivity, still claimed a victim identity when she was demanding rights from the criminal justice system. If Gloria’s varied ways of understanding herself are seemingly contradictory, when viewed within the context of the many ways victims have been culturally represented, her actions make more sense. If a victim identity has a diverse array of social meanings, women’s various uses of this identity are not surprising.

Finally, some women were simply not able to fully and unconditionally claim or reject a victim identity, in light of the multiple ways they understood what it means to be a victim. Consider the following conversation I had with Barbara, a thirty-six-year-old white woman who experienced verbal and physical abuse from her now ex-husband:

AL: And how about victim? What does that term mean to you?
BARBARA: Well, that term is actually really frustrating because I feel like it’s come to mean something very bad.
AL: How so?
BARBARA: Because people who are victims, you know, are survivors. It's just become really politically wrong to be called a victim, and so there's no word that can express when something happens to me. This happened to me and I didn't do anything to deserve it and I couldn't help it, and so... but I don't want to say I'm a victim because that conjures up well, do I bring this on myself or do I play the role victim? It's just such a negative word now.

AL: It sounds like you think blame is associated with it?

BARBARA: Very much so, very much so. But yeah, so that can even make me defensive, being called a victim. Because it makes me feel like people are thinking well, yeah, I just do this for a living or something. And I don't. This really did happen and I didn't choose to make it happen.

AL: Do you relate to the term at all?

BARBARA: See, if it didn't have a negative connotation, yes. Definitely so. Definitely.

AL: And what part do you relate to? If you could separate the negative, then what part of the word do you relate to?

BARBARA: The part that says that something happened to me that I didn't provoke and I couldn't do anything about. Something that was awful.

Barbara astutely recognized that a victim identity is not an innocent one, as it is often associated with blame. However, she also recognized that being a victim means something “awful” happened to her that she had no control over, and it is this construction of victim that she related to. Barbara’s understanding of a victim is shaped by competing and contradictory discourses, making it difficult for her to firmly claim or reject the identity. As she made clear, she believed there is “no word” that can communicate her experiences; she found victim just too tainted.

Claiming Responsibility and Constructing Control

As I documented earlier, another culturally dominant way of understanding domestic violence and victimization is through what Berns (2004) deems the “victim empowerment frame.” This way of understanding victimization is sympathetic to victims yet holds them responsible for solving the problem of violence in their lives. Berns found that popular media in the United States routinely tell women that “they need to ‘take back the power’ to ‘take charge of their lives’” (p. 58). Many of the women I interviewed were influenced by this perspective and understood their victimization and experiences in this light.

While several of the women told me that they used to blame themselves for their partners’ violence, at the time of the interview, none of them appeared to directly hold themselves at fault. However, nearly half of the women reported believing that they played some role or possessed some level of responsibility in their abusive relationships. This responsibility included not standing up to their abusers or leaving the relationship, playing a victim “role” and/or having a victim “frame of mind,” and initiating or participating in verbal and physical violence. Oftentimes, this belief in one’s own responsibility influenced a woman’s decision to claim or reject a victim identity.
Several of the women spoke of “letting” their partners abuse them, which they explain as either not “standing up” to their partner by calling the police or remaining in the relationship and continuing to see their partner despite the violence. For example, Liz had a thirteen-year on-and-off relationship with John. John and Liz were both longtime speed addicts, and John had been both physically and verbally abusive to her. Liz said she has frequently reconciled with John both because she loved him and because he was her drug connection. Discussing John’s violent behavior, she admitted that she had “let him get away with it so much.” At one point in the interview she told me she had vowed to her children that she would stop doing drugs and wanted to permanently end her relationship with John. She said, “I’m not gonna let [him] treat me like a victim no more.” While Liz claimed the victim identity, she also used the phrase “let him” three separate times, indicating a belief that she had some control or level of responsibility in her situation.

Other women spoke of a victim “role” or “frame of mind.” For example, Kathy, a thirty-five-year-old white woman, was physically and sexually assaulted one evening by Nathan, a man she was casually dating. As a child, she had been sexually abused by her brother and physically abused by her mother and her ex-husband. She said throughout her life she had been “trained” as a victim and, as such, is a “good victim.” Kathy took some level of responsibility for the violence she experienced from Nathan by stating that she had a “victim mentality” that resulted in her putting herself into “dangerous situations.”

Kathy’s language was peppered with phrases such as “good victim” and “victim mentality.” Kathy and other women who used this type of language reproduced dominant cultural discourses that hold women responsible for their own victimization through particular ways of thinking and acting. Good victims, or women who have a victim mentality, are women who fail to recognize signs that a man might be a potential abuser, who “take” their partners’ abuse without standing up for themselves, or who fail to permanently leave an abusive partner. As I discuss in greater depth below, a focus on “victim’s empowerment” has led to a common public belief that it is the battered woman herself who must end the violence in her life by taking “charge of her life” and taking “back the power” (Berns 2004:158). Kathy stated that part of being a victim “is a belief that you have about yourself sometimes, where you somehow believe that you don’t deserve something better, and so you end up in this victim role.” She believed that the very way she thought about herself led to her repeat victimizations.

Finally, other women saw their actions or behaviors as playing a role in their abusive relationships. Several women believed that their yelling, calling their partner names, and using violence themselves gave them some level of responsibility for their situations. For example, Gina, a forty-year-old white woman, was married to Joe, whom she described as verbally abusive. On a recent evening, Joe belittled her in front of their children. She confronted him about it, and they got into a verbal argument. She ended up throwing some fruit at him and decided she wanted him to leave. She tried to pull him to the front door, and they had a physical altercation where he grabbed her by the wrists and she scratched his face. At one point during
the interview Gina told me: “You know, I felt like I let this happen. And to some extent, I did. Had I not, reacted like that . . . Joe can push my buttons, and I just really lost it.” She continued by saying that she “wasn’t taking care” of herself and was very stressed because they had just moved to a new state, and she had lost her previous social support system. Thus she described feeling that she was really “out of” herself and believed this led to her reacting to Joe’s verbal abuse the way she did, leading her to conclude that she played a role in the incident.

“Empowerment” and Issues of Blame

A focus on victim empowerment centers attention on why battered women stay in abusive relationships and what they individually can do to solve their problems of violence (Berns 2004; Dunn 2004). Berns (2004:156) maintains that while some media use the empowerment frame in hostile ways that explicitly blame women for staying in the relationship, in other venues “the discourse is kinder but still holds the victim partially responsible.” This “kinder” discourse appeared influential to many of the women I interviewed. While they almost uniformly refused to directly blame themselves for the violence they experienced, they often held themselves partially responsible. For example, while Liz accepted some degree of responsibility for her abusive relationship by not firmly ending the relationship with John, she placed the blame for his violent behavior squarely at his feet. She emphatically stated at one point: “What he is doing is not okay.” This distinction highlights an important difference for the women between responsibility and blame; while Liz believed her failure to end the relationship with John translated into her “letting” him treat her like a victim, she did not indicate in any way that she caused or deserved his abuse.

Clearly, similarities exist between discourses that blame the victim and discourses that hold women partially responsible for the abuse they suffer. Berns (2004:154) demonstrates that the concept of victim empowerment was originally conceived by victim’s advocates and social service workers as a means to “identify and change the distribution of power within a culture to achieve social justice.” However, this message lost its political and activist punch when adopted by the popular media. Commonly, “the media use the frame of victim in a style of storytelling that leaves out the abuser and the cultural and structural context” (p. 155). Thus “empowerment” becomes solely about what battered women do or do not do. Under this framework, if an abused woman fails to “empower” herself (i.e., through calling the police on her abuser or by leaving the relationship), she may be open to blame for any future violence she experiences.

The narratives of the women I interviewed revealed that they, also, struggled with the close relationship between responsibility and blame. While many women’s notions of victimhood were clearly shaped by the victim empowerment frame, they often had a difficult time distinguishing their perceived responsibility from blame. Consider the exchange I had with Daisy, a forty-seven-year-old African American
woman who experienced a brutal sexual and physical assault from a man she used to date:

AL: What about the term victim? What does that word mean to you?
DAISY: I felt I was a victim. It means something that happens to you that you can’t control, you have no control. I felt like I was a victim, but I’m not going to be in that victim frame of mind so I’m not going to be a victim anymore.
AL: What is the victim frame of mind?
DAISY: When you always put yourself in a situation where you can’t . . .
AL: I know it’s a difficult question.
DAISY: Well, you know, like if you’re naive and you go out with some of your friends who are more . . . streetwise than you, and they put you in a situation where you don’t know what the hell you’re going to do, you’re a victim . . . ’cause you shouldn’t have been there in the first place. You know what kind of people they are. . . . There are things that you can do to not put yourself in that position.
AL: And that’s what you feel you’re better at now? Taking actions to prevent being in a situation . . .
DAISY: Yes. Being aware of your surroundings at all times. That’s what I think will help you avoid being a victim. . . . I was [a victim], because I was, I was down on my luck. I was feeling very . . . my self-esteem was low. I had a good job, I was in a car wreck . . . I got injured, I lost my job, I lost my apartment in the end. I had no one to help me.

At first, Daisy says that being a victim means having something happen to you that you cannot control, challenging cultural discourses that directly blame the victim. However, she immediately follows this idea by stating that she was not going to be in a victim “frame of mind” and, thus, will not be a victim anymore. When asked what being in a victim frame of mind entailed, she explains, with difficulties, that it means that you’re “naive” and not “streetwise.” She places responsibility for one’s victimization on people who “put you in a situation where you don’t know what the hell you’re going to do.” However, she adds, “You know what kind of people they are. . . . There are things that you can do to not put yourself in that position.” Here, Daisy transfers virtually all responsibility to the victim by implying that to avoid victimization, a person should avoid certain people and situations. She then discusses her own situation and continues framing victimization in terms of victim empowerment: “I was [a victim], because I was, I was down on my luck. I was feeling very . . . my self-esteem was low.” Finally, in the end, she reverts back to discussing events that contributed to her victimization that she could not control: being in a car wreck, getting injured, and losing her job and apartment. Throughout her narrative, Daisy shifted responsibility to and from the victim. She appears unsure about whether her victimization was something she could control. While at times she seems to reflect the victim empowerment frame, she also seems aware that this perspective holds victims overly responsible for their victimization, something she does not appear to want to do.

The use of the victim empowerment frame by women like Daisy is not surprising. Not only is it likely that victimized women have encountered this discourse on
numerous occasions, but this perspective also provides women with a potential means of controlling violence in their lives and preventing future victimization. The women I spoke with commonly believed that changing their behavior or mind-set would reduce their risk of being harmed again. Many of the women I spoke with had experienced oppression and victimization on multiple levels. Carla, Kathy, and Liz had each been physically or sexually abused by more than one perpetrator during their lifetimes. It makes sense that they would be searching for a means of believing (whether true or not) that they could prevent future victimization. Citing bell hooks, Mahoney (1994:62) states, “Women who face exploitation daily ‘cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives.’”

“I Can Be the Victim or I Can Be the Survivor”: Expressing Agency

A final theme central to some of the women’s identity work was that of “surviving.” Victim’s advocates and women’s rights activists have used the typification of “survivor” to counter the myriad of problems associated with “victimhood” (Dunn 2005). According to Profit (1996:29), a survivor identity is used to highlight women’s victimization and agency: “The conceptualization of ‘battered women’ as ‘survivors’ acknowledges their tremendous strengths and coping skills in surviving violence as well as their victimization, pain, and loss.”

The four women who claimed a survivor identity seemed to do so to demonstrate that they were not weak and helpless. Liz’s case is particularly telling. As discussed above, she was addicted to speed, had been physically and sexually abused as a child, and had mental health issues:

Liz: I’m not strong, but I have... I’m street-smart and I’m a survivor. So that’s the only thing holding my ass up.
AL: How do you see yourself as being a survivor?
Liz: Look at my history.
AL: Just that you’re still here today and...
Liz: My children are well-mannered, well-behaved, well-dressed, you know what I mean. They’re well-taken care of and they’re very, very, very loved. Loved more than anything in the world. That gives me a lot of satisfaction. And you know, I do keep surviving. My morals, I do have my standards. I do have things that I won’t do and I’m a good person.

For Liz, being a survivor meant that, despite what she has endured in her life and all of the violence she has experienced, she is still a good parent and still has “morals” and “standards.” While she said she is not strong, she did make clear that she’s a “good person.” For Liz, her “history” alone demonstrates that she is a survivor.

However, several women seemed to use the survivor identity as another way to articulate the victim empowerment frame. For example, Florence, a fifty-year-old white woman, described herself as “very vulnerable” the night she met and moved in with the man who eventually became her husband (whom she was separated
from at the time of the interview). When I asked Florence what the term *victim* meant to her, she replied:

> I have a weird philosophy on that. I don’t think the batterer makes you the victim; I think you make you the victim. It’s like the glass of water—is it half full or half empty? I can be the victim or I can be the survivor. So I choose to be the survivor. For me, I... you know, it took me ten years to get here; I’m not going to get psychologically or emotionally or even physically out of this overnight. But there’s hope. And where there’s hope, I’ll be more than glad to apply myself. I refuse to be a victim. A victim is someone, to me, that, if I haul off and punch you right now, you go cower in the corner and then go home tonight and tell everyone [mimics weeping], “she hit me.” But if you say, “Hey, you know what, I’m not going to call the cops on you, but you’re not going to hit me again.” You know, or “That slug, that’s nothing. You’re bullshit.” You know, “You’re not going to get me down on that.” That’s a survivor; you know: “I’m going to go home, put an icepack on my nose, and forget about you, pal.”

Florence found a survivor identity preferable to a victim identity, which she described as doing nothing but cowering and complaining. For her, being a survivor means that “there’s hope.” However, she also seemed to translate survivorhood into her taking responsibility for ending the violence in her life. While she emphasized her strength and resilience, she also stated that “the batterer doesn’t make you the victim, you make you the victim,” which seemingly erases much of the batterer’s responsibility.

A survivor identity is less stigmatizing than a victim identity and addresses some of the problems of the victim/agent dichotomy inherent to victim discourses. However, as Dunn (2005:23) acknowledges, “Calling battered women ‘survivors,’ while granting them agency, may only shift responsibility and attention back to them as individuals and away from the social structures and forces that they must overcome.” Indeed, consider the words of Betsy, a forty-one-year-old white woman who had just left her second abusive relationship. She told me she did not like the term *victim*, because once battered women get out of their abusive relationships, they are survivors. Asked what the term *victim* meant to her, she answered, “Like you’re helpless. And in a lot of ways, we are when we’re in that situation. We are helpless. But once we get out, we’re not helpless anymore.” However, later in the interview she acknowledged “feeling like a victim still” because she was still afraid of both her ex-husband and her ex-boyfriend. For her, this fear appeared to be at odds with what it meant to be a survivor. Thus, despite her assertion that “once we get out we’re not helpless anymore,” she said that “in some ways I am still helpless” because she was still afraid. This lingering fear appears to prevent her full identification with a “survivor.”

**CONCLUSION**

As I have illustrated, not every woman who is abused in an intimate partner relationship sees herself as a victim. From an interactionist perspective, this makes sense, as social identities are not objective statuses—a woman is not a victim by virtue
of the “facts” of what has happened to her (Holstein and Miller 1997). Instead, identities are created by discourses and are thus interpretations people use in self-construction and self-representation (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Theorists and researchers have shown that the process of drawing from discourses to construct identity is often a complex and untidy practice, particularly for identities that are “troubled” (see, e.g., Gubrium and Holstein 2001). According to Loseke (2001:108), assigning meaning to the lived experience of troubles is complex because “in lived experience, troubles do not come to us with labels describing their names, meanings, seriousness, and so forth.”

Victimization discourses are particularly complex, as are the identities they offer. What makes identity work with victim discourses exceptionally problematic is that a victim identity is not solely a discredited identity, but in some contexts can be necessary and even beneficial to claim. While I have demonstrated that not all abused women choose to identify themselves as victims, as Ferraro and Johnson (1983) show, battered women must at least recognize that they have been victimized in order to confront and challenge their partners’ violence. They also must prove they are true victims in order to demonstrate they are worthy of needed social assistance and intervention. In her work with women who were stalked by their former partners, Dunn (2001:309) demonstrates that the presentation of self has real consequences for victims: “For women whose former partners threaten their lives, the ability to successfully make claims to be legitimate and worthy victims can mean the difference between living in hell and having the opportunity to transcend the dangers and move on.” As I have shown, being a legitimate and worthy victim means demonstrating blamelessness, helplessness, and passivity—traits that are not valued in a culture that prizes individualism.

It is thus not surprising that many of the women whom I interviewed struggled with how to both understand and construct themselves. While many women claimed a victim identity, believing it to be a useful means of representing and communicating their experiences, they were also aware of its limitations. As one woman stated, “I’m the victim and that’s what the court needs to see. And I’ll take their pity.” Having to claim an identity associated with weakness, helplessness, and powerlessness is not desirable. To counter these associations, many women attempted to show that they possessed some level of control in their relationships, by highlighting how they were agents, by taking some level of responsibility for the violence, and by claiming a “survivor” identity. However, the irony is that in doing so, women risk opening themselves to blame and losing their victim status altogether.

The double bind of victimhood is not limited to abused women and stalking victims. Secombe, James, and Walters (1998) demonstrate how female welfare recipients are very much aware of the stigma associated with welfare and the individualistic perspective commonly used to frame women who receive welfare. In fact, because many of the women themselves appeared to accept the popular constructions of the welfare mother, they had difficulty framing their own receipt of governmental assistance and attempted to do so in ways that avoided stigmatization. The authors
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conclude that the “hegemony of the individualistic perspective” is a large barrier to dealing with poverty and welfare use (Secombe, James, and Walters 1998:863).

Arguably, a focus on individualism is also a barrier to fighting domestic violence and other types of victimization, as it ignores social and cultural factors. Women often face limited institutional support in ending the violence in their lives and staying away from their abusers (Baker 1997), particularly if they are on the social margins (Crenshaw 1994). They may experience indifference or even direct hostility from criminal justice system professionals (Belknap 2001; Bennett, Goodman, and Dutton 1999; Ferraro and Pope 1993; Stephens and Sindon 2000). They may also face financial constraints, particularly if they have children they are supporting (Baker 1997; Belknap 2001). Research also demonstrates that leaving an abusive relationship increases a woman’s risk for injury or even death (Mahoney 1992). Further, some women also do not wish to leave their abusive partners, but still desire the violence to end. Perspectives that encourage victim empowerment and individual responsibility without taking into account these social processes ultimately fail battered women.

Minow (1993) calls victimhood a “cramped identity.” Victim discourses need to be broadened to recognize battered women’s experiences as both victims and as agents, as women who may be hurt, traumatized, in need of assistance and as women who resist, fight back, and endure in whatever ways they are able. As Schneider (2000:76) writes, “Neither victimization nor agency should be glorified, understood as static, viewed in isolation, or perceived as an individual or personal issue.” To do so fails to acknowledge the functions that both oppression and resistance play in women’s lives. While survivor discourses seem to address these issues somewhat, they do not appear to completely halt the cultural tendency of holding women responsible for ending the violence in their lives. According to Dunn (2001:309), the accomplishment of survivorhood “may be a hollow victory.”

My research shows how available victim discourses appear to both enable and constrain battered women’s processes of self-construction and self-representation. Battered women draw from the “fund of interpretive possibilities” (Fraser 1997:152) surrounding women’s victimization to make sense of their experiences, yet this fund is limited in many ways. Cultural codes such as identities serve as resources “for creating a sense of the personal self and for making sense of others” (Loseke 2003:131). However, identities can be overly simplistic and are often based on false dichotomies (good/bad, victim/agent). Because they frequently fail to take into account the complexities of daily life, they are not always neatly adopted and applied.

In spite of these limitations in the existing victim discourses, and in spite of social institutions that often demand particular self-presentations, the women I interviewed often resisted being pigeonholed or neatly labeled. Many refused to use one dominant victim discourse to make sense of their experiences. In their identity work they often pieced together parts of different discourses to create a narrative that fit with both the complexities of their lives and the way they wanted to construct and understand themselves. They attempted to accept the positive aspects of
a victim identity while rejecting the negative ones. To the best of their abilities, the women constructed and presented an identity of their own design and choosing. Institutional identities such as victim do not simply determine the selves of people without contestation (Fox 2001). Ultimately, in navigating the complex and power-laden terrain of victim discourses, battered women reflect both agency and resistance in their actions, arguably in varied, subtle, and often intricate manners.

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NOTE

1. The majority of women in the sample (thirty-six) were involved with the court system through a criminal case, primarily the arrest of the woman’s partner. However, seven of the women reported that they themselves were arrested. Three of the women were involved with the court system because they had filed a restraining order. One woman had no court involvement but did have police contact.

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