

**EXPERIENCE AS A
KNOWLEDGE BASE
WHILE WORKING WITH
ABUSED WOMEN**

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Introduction

My workplace, *The Norwegian Resource Centre for Information and Studies on Violence* performs various activities according to mandate and tasks given by the three funding ministries; The Ministry of Justice, The Ministry of Social and Health Affairs and The Ministry of Child and Family Affairs. The Centre is affiliated with Oslo University College and located on its campus. The centres main activities are to collect systematise and disseminate knowledge about:

- Violence and victims
- The consequences of violence
- Service initiatives for victims of violence

One of the specific targeted areas is violence against women and to contribute to increased knowledge among professionals and volunteers. The centre also generates new knowledge and conducts own research programs. For more information about the centre, there are brochures to be disseminated.

Being a social worker by profession, I have my work experience from social welfare units and from an emergency unit, doing crisis counselling to raped women and victims of Violence in general, hereunder abused women. Here I was especially interested in building up and develop the competence in

emergency counselling. Now I am a senior adviser in ***The Norwegian Resource Centre for Information and Studies on Violence.***

A National Plan of Action

In 1999 The Norwegian Government released a national plan of action for three years, on the subject *Violence against Women*. The plan points out several initiatives where the Government allocated financial resources in order to improve the quality of services towards abused women. The Centre I work in has responsibilities to carry out some of the initiatives in the programs, hereunder initiating *programs for competence development*

Experience as a knowledge base while working with abused women. Why this focus?

In this study I emphasise a question that has bothered me for a time: what role does experience play as a source to knowledge, and further, to good practice, compared to what?

Could be simplified as theoretical knowledge (meaning read and understood theories and examples). What kind of knowledge is needed to educate helpful service providers and how should educational programs be composed to encounter the complex needs of security, practical, legal and psychosocial assistance for abused women and their children?

There are a variety of work forms and programs, partly based on principles of self-help programs, partly on the basis of a variety of professions and their specific focuses. They all have important contributions to the helping process, but also different perspectives.

However, there has been a lack of discussion on experience as a way of learning and to what degree experience as such should be emphasised in authorised educational programs. My study does not intend to answer that important question, but will be an initiative to focus on processing life experience and work experience into competence building.

Research and teaching subjects are often focused on describing the violence, from different aspects, in various perspectives, actions and reactions, prevention, violence control, after-effects, incidents and often referred to statistics. Criticism has been raised towards professional helpers and their

lack of registering and further handling problems of family violence in their work lot. Criticism has also been raised towards NGOs (non-governmental organisations) for lack of development and progress in the helping programs.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis is that experiences do play a role in social work with abused women, but there is uncertainty in which way and to what degree. The aim of the study is to explore this area of social work with battered women.

Most theories have a basis in research or systematic studies of real life, which means that life and human reactions has been studied under experimental circumstances. Knowledge gathered from experiences, whether it is from work situations or from own lived life, has not been studied, at least in this field.

This is probably a beginning of such a study, and I invite others to share ideas and reflection upon this matter.

Method

The study will be based upon qualitative study, interviewing a strategic choice of 8-10 informants. Informants are chosen from a group of service providers having their current work in specialised services/emergency centres or crisis centres with abused women or in generalist services like social welfare units. Informants with *or without* relevant professional education for the field will be interviewed, as well as being experienced through acquired practice or by experience acquired from own lived life. Various combinations of the above aspects will be the matters for some informants.

So far I have had 1-hour interview with 4 informants. The analysis of their contributions will have to be postponed until I have finished interviewing of all informants. However, new and interesting questions might arise from the collected information – which of course might influence upon the semi-structured questionnaire or the way subjects are being followed up during interviews.

Since the study is not finished and not published otherwise I have only quoted a few statements from the interviews presented on the conference.

Quotations:

Service provider's interpretation of self experienced incidents and the understanding of responses to violent incidents in others

I believe in self-help. But I don't think you need to have been beaten up to be a good service provider... but to have been there... emotionally... I think that you have a different understanding if you have felt what pain is... and know what you are talking about... It is important to know what emotions are, that fear is fear, anger is anger... But it is a hard line to draw, between encouraging to open up and to protect from doing all the talking at a time.

It is important to have enough distance to your own experiences and to know that the feelings and reactions not necessarily are the same for others, and that your own history might be very different from others...

The feeling you have had, you have to carry with you all your life – that feeling will turn up again and you have to learn how to live with it. You can call it recognition – or a gut feeling...

I never use myself as an example. It is not beneficial. What is beneficial is that I might catch an important signal, have an implemented understanding of what is being expressed and draw things out of that... Meaning I can probably recognize a picture of complexity...

I have experienced lots of the bad parts we encounter here... But it is very important that it is thoroughly handled and put in its right place... It is very important to me, not to impose on these women what I have experienced...

Own violence experience might sometimes be a risk... We have seen service providers who had to leave the job for that reason.

Having experienced abuse is not a prerequisite for being a helpful service provider. On the contrary, I would for instance be very careful hiring counsellors with own experiences of child sexual abuse...

Experience acquired through practice

The best knowledge is the one acquired from meeting these women, to have encountered the variety of problems they display, to have to work with these complex problems, to see how different women are.

I have met service providers who do not have this specific experience, but understand everything. There are many professionals having worked hard with their own personal stuff, been through therapy etc.

I think you ought to take care of yourself, if you forget that you might get severe problems...

Now I can look back and see how I have learned from experience of working here: I can see how prejudice I were about how they were doing, when someone told me they had been sexually abused, physically abused, having a father abusing alcohol, partner abuse... then I would think that the sexual abuse had to be the worst... but it is not like that...

I would not have learned all this only by reading books, but by entering the door I was invited through and by listening to what they wanted to share...

I learned most from the shared experiences of abused women. The day I have no more to learn I hope I am not here...

Intense impressions:

How do you reflect upon the psychological effect stories of violation and abuse might have on yourself?

If you are there to be helpful to others you can not carry your own problems and need help yourself, and if you need your own support... That part must have been taken care of before...

You are not supposed to leave your job and thereafter have to work on your own problems! There is lots to learn from bad experience!

It is important to have access to your own emotions to enlighten an issue, but the point is, you are not there to do that for your own benefit – and you can see that happens... which is very little successful...

If you feel things gets close to private experiences, one have to go out of it, not mix the cards! You have to know yourself well enough to recognize the signal – nobody else can take care of that!

Other problems in life turn into trivialities. I learn more to appreciate what works well in my own life. I never bring work lot home. A long walk, some exercise and use of humour is my way of coping with these heavy stories. – The nights, however, might be exhausting sometimes...

We have regular staff reports, informal coaching from leader and monthly group supervision with external supervisor... We actually need more...

In here abnormalities turn out to be the normal... If there is an ongoing family conflict in the helper's own life, she is not much of a helper for any other person with severe problems. – It is probably not easy to admit it, but it is a necessity.

Competence development has although many different aspects. Some of them are rather difficult to come to agreement on, because they depend on individual interpretations of notions expressing the quality of an experienced event or emotions related to experiences. Few service providers have been encouraged to reflect upon their experiences in order to conceptualise the subjective experienced meaning – and thus be able to process the experience into their own private knowledge base. There is also, in general, a lack of focus and conceptualisation of experiences in the service field and in the educational system where service providers are supposed to be provided with sufficient or required knowledge.

One of these teasing and complicated questions is: What is understood as being competent a helpful behaviour? And a follow-up question: What is an adequate way to develop such competence? Other questions are: *What aspects in helpful or supportive actions should be emphasised (legal, protective, psychological, medical, crisis interventions, social security or practical support) and what type of skills should be specially trained?*

There is some challenging work to be done in this matter.

Copies of Semi structured Interview Scheme for dissemination

To create a certain frame of subjects for all informants I found it necessary to have a semi-structured scheme, although the various subjects are responded to in various ways, related to individual experience and emotional commitment. In the following I present the current Interview scheme which displays subjects that are focused during interview.

Semi-structured questionnaire:

Workplace - qualifications:

1. What kind of organisation do you work in/are you connected to?
2. Who is the main target group?
3. What kind of personal qualifications are required from a competent helper?

The Importance of Experience:

4. Do you consider experience with painful incidents from own life as an advantage or a drawback when interfering with abused women?
5. Do you consider own experience of abuse or maltreatment as a prerequisite for being a beneficial helper?
6. Do you think helpers having experienced violent relationships or abuse have a qualitative different understanding than those not having such experience?

Experience acquired through practice

7. To what extent do you believe acquired experience from practice is beneficial to the helping process?
8. What actions do you take to learn from your work experience? In case of actions, does it concern both the good practice and the less good?
9. Are there any routines in your workplace in order to deal with and learn from work experience?
10. If, yes, how is it organised, and do you find it sufficient?

Communication/Contents

- When interviewing an abused, threatened or ill-treated woman about her need of assistance, do you search special key information? If yes, give examples:
11. Are there special subjects you consider more important than other subjects do?
- Are there subjects you decide to avoid?

Linguistic communication

- Do you consider choice of words and expressions as being important when talking to women (or children) about their experiences? If so, in what regard?
- Are there differences in your personal choice of words and the abused women's choice of words when talking about violent incidents?
- Have you, in your work unit, participated in discussions about the use and meaning of linguistic forms when communicating with abused women?

Relation between the helper's interpretations of self-experienced incidents and the understanding of responses to violent incidents in others

12. Do you regard it as an advantage or a drawback if the helping person have experienced violent incidents or abuse when being in a helping position within the same field?
13. If you have similar experiences, what are your reflections on your own experiences compared to those of help-seeking women?
14. Do you protect yourself from working with incidents or situations being close to your own history or present experiences?

Intense impressions:

15. How do you reflect upon the psychological effect stories of violation and abuse might have on yourself?
16. Is this a matter of concern at your workplace?
17. How do you handle the situational change by coming home after work? What actions do you take to disconnect or to change your direction of attention?
18. Have you ever participated in any organised or planned sessions in order to share impressions and learn how to cope as a helper?
19. Is there any regular arrangement concerning this matter at your present work place?
20. What is your consideration of this matter?

Challenges:

21. What do you find being the greatest challenges working within this field?
22. And what is the most satisfying?
23. What have generated most knowledge?

Competence building:

24. What kind of advice will you offer to liaisons concerning competence building in this field?
25. If you have to give priority to the importance of teaching subjects, what would you enhance as most important?
26. What kind of personal qualifications and knowledge would you emphasise from job applicants if you had the responsibility to deal with staff engagement?