The psychological aspects of battered African-American women

Mira Sams Iheme
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The Psychological Aspects of Battered African-American Women

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Clark Atlanta University
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ABSTRACT
COUNSELING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

IHEME, MIRA S. B.A., SPELMAN COLLEGE, 1983
M.S., FORT VALLEY STATE COLLEGE, 1986

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF BATTERED AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Advisor: Dr. Eugene Herrington
Dissertation dated: July 1996

There is sparse research on the battering phenomena as it relates to African-American women. Therefore, this study was undertaken in order to determine whether a relationship existed between battering, depression and low levels of self-esteem in African-American women. Another purpose of this study was to obtain a profile of demographic characteristics of these battered African-American women.

The study was conducted in two battered women shelters located in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. The actual site locations were in Fulton and DeKalb counties. A quasi-experimental design was used. The non-random sample consisted of 53 African-American women who resided in the battered women shelters during the research period. The Beck Depression Inventory, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and the Questionnaire for Battered African-American women were administered.
Statistical procedures that were used to analyze the data from this study were frequency analysis and the Pearson R. The results indicated that there was a relationship between battering and depression in African-American women. There were also variations in the demographic data of these women.

Limitations of this research and implications for counselors are included. Recommendations for future research conclude this work.
Acknowledgements

I thank God for my accomplishments and allowing me to reach another milestone. My gratitude is extended to my husband Richard and our 5 year old daughter, Raven for always being supportive, encouraging, patient and loving towards me during this endeavor. I would also like to thank my professors at Clark Atlanta University, Dr. Eugene Herrington, Dr. Robert Smothers and Dr. Nancy Ritsko for their scholastic guidance, constructive criticism, encouragement and advice.
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Chapter I

The Problem

Deschler (1984) has defined a battered woman as someone who has suffered a series of physically injurious attacks by her companion. Such a series of attacks were classified as habitual when battering has occurred more than twice within a 12 month period. The time period of occurrences is crucial. For example, according to Deschler's definition, two incidents of violence over a ten year period do not constitute an habitual pattern.

Researchers often differ in their definitions of a battered woman. Such variations may be attributed to the researcher's culture and background. For example, Richie (1985), an African-American, defined battered minority women (BMW) as the "systematic deprivation inflicted upon third world men by society which, in turn, is inflicted upon third world women. Due to their frustration from prolonged socioeconomic oppression, some Black men often physically assault Black women," causing serious bodily injuries. However, the research also shows that the battering phenomenon permeates cultures and economic classes.

Violence is one of the most blatant demonstrations of abusive force in an attempt to maintain domination over another individual. This type of violence epitomizes the actualization of the concept of hierarchical rule and coercive authority. Domestic abuse data readily support this national problem. Pagelow (1984) estimated that approximately 12 million women were battered in the United States between 1978 and 1983. The Council on Battered Women has reported that every 15 seconds a woman is battered in this country by a male with whom she is involved in a domestic relationship.
Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) have suggested that the issue of battering women by male partners has evolved from a taboo subject to a widespread recognized phenomenon. In terms of statistical data, prevalent studies have indicated that between one-fifth and one-third of all women will be physically assaulted by a partner or ex-partner during their lifetime (Frieze & Browne, 1989). Additionally, it has been estimated that between two million (Straus & Gelles, 1990) and four million (Browne, 1992) women are severely assaulted by male partners each year in the United States.

The extent of wife assault has been documented further by gender differences in homicide. According to the unpublished data of Carmody and Williams (1993) in a Supplementary Homicide Report, 12,582 women ages 18 years or older were killed in one-on-one events of homicide between 1989 and 1993. Of these women, 52% were killed by either a husband, ex-husband, common-law husband, or boyfriend. These deaths have resulted from the explosive interactions of battering.

According to Hallinan and Ellis (1994), 2.1 million to over 8 million women are battered each year. Ten percent to almost seventy percent of American wives were abused in their lifetime. Of these, more than 30% of battered wives and girlfriends were assaulted again within six months. Thirty percent of murdered women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends in 1992. Eight percent (8%) to twenty-six percent of pregnant women sought medical attention for battering. Thirty percent of the injured women were treated in the emergency room as a result of battering.
Caucasian vs. African-American Female Assault

When battering is examined among African-Americans, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found that reported incidents of wife battering were nearly forty percent more common among African-American than among Caucasian couples. Also, Cazanave and Straus (1979) found that African-American husbands were three times more likely to have slapped their wives or engaged in severe violence within a given year as compared to Caucasian husbands. The reasons may be due to African-American women reporting abuse to police more frequently than women of other races, thus increasing their battering statistics. Caucasian women tend to underreport incidents of abuse or seek counseling rather than police assistance. It is theorized that some Caucasian women tend to be more submissive and docile to their husbands than some African-American women. Therefore, it may be that Caucasian women seem to tolerate battering more and report it to police less. Also, African-American women make up only approximately twelve percent of the population. Comprising such a small percentage of the population, African-American women cannot possibly dominate the battering victimization statistics.

In contrast, Lockhart (1985) found no significant difference between the proportion of African-American and Caucasian women who reported that they had been victims of spousal abuse. Additional comparisons between the two racial groups indicated that, among the abused respondents, there was no statistically significant difference found between the median number of times when African-American and Caucasian women were victims of battering. The results of this investigation supported Staples’ (1976) conclusion that when race is considered, African-American couples are not inherently more violent than Caucasian couples. However, African-Americans are captured more frequently in statistics because
African-American women report these incidents more frequently than their Caucasian counterparts.

Caucasian vs. African-American Wife Mortality Rates

National mortality statistics provided another indication of the severity of reported violence perpetrated against African-American females by African-American males. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (1984), in 1982 African-American females had a homicide rate of 12 per 100,000 as compared to 3 per 100,000 for Caucasian females. In addition, the homicide rate of African-American females (12 per 100,000) in 1982 was higher than the homicide rate of Caucasian males (9.5 per 100,000). African-American males committed three-fourths of these homicides against African-American women.

This study was made to examine the battering phenomenon experienced by African-American women and the effect of battering on depression and self-esteem. The pertinent literature is primarily devoted to speculation about factors that contribute to a battered woman's inability to extricate herself from an untenable situation. Although African-American women may report abuse to police more frequently than women of other races, they are generally underrepresented in the studies.

Although this research was done to examine the relationship between battering, depression and low self-esteem as experienced by African-American women, the writer acknowledged that sometimes depression and low self-esteem may occur in unhappy relationships. Also, depression and low self-esteem may be factors prevalent prior to the beginning of the relationship.
Researchers such as Gelles (1983), Pagelow (1984) and Walker (1979) agree that the majority of battered women are depressed. Walker (1979) further emphasizes that battered women suffer from varying degrees of depression, anxiety, and fear during the time they spend in an abusive relationship. These women have feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, despair, accompanied by a lack of faith in their ability to alter their domestic situations.

According to Coopersmith (1967), self-esteem is the evaluative attitude that one has towards the self, or the evaluation that an individual makes and maintains regarding oneself. Investigators postulate that people with higher self-esteem are more effective in dealing with the demands of their environment. Conversely, individuals having low self-esteem are less effective in dealing with the environment’s demands.

**Purpose of the Study**

More specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between battering, self-esteem and depression among African-American females. To perform this task, the following research questions were used:

1. What is the correlation between battering and depression among this group of African-American women?
2. What is the correlation between battering and self-esteem among this group of African-American women?
3. What is the correlation between self-esteem and depression among this group of African-American women?
Questions to be Researched

This study was designed to obtain information useful in answering the following questions:

1. Is there a relationship between battering and depression in African-American women?
2. Is there a relationship between battering and chronic levels of low self-esteem in African-American women?
3. Is there a relationship between self-esteem and depression?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were used in conducting this study:

\( H_1: \) There will be no statistically significant correlation between the battering response test scores and the depression test scores of these African-American women.

\( H_2: \) There will be no statistically significant correlation between the battering response test scores and the self-esteem test scores of these African-American women.

\( H_3: \) There will be no statistically significant correlation between the self-esteem test scores and the depression test scores of these African-American women.

Significance of the Study

The writer hopes the information obtained from this study will add to the understanding of depression and feelings of low self-esteem among this group of battered African-American women. Legislation and statistical data justify the need to examine this