A descriptive study of the relationship between the level of self-esteem and termination of an abusive relationship among domestic violence shelter residents

Crystal N. Morgan
CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

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Among Domestic Violence Shelter Residents

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE LEVEL OF SELF-ESTEEM AND TERMINATION OF
AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP AMONG DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE SHELTER RESIDENTS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
CRYSTAL NYCOLE MORGAN

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
MAY 1998
ABSTRACT
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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE LEVEL OF SELF-ESTEEM AND TERMINATION OF
AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP AMONG DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE SHELTER RESIDENTS

Advisor: Dr. Gale Horton

Thesis dated May, 1998

This study examined whether the relationship between the level of self-esteem and a woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship was significant. This study was based on the idea that a woman's decision to leave the abusive relationship was due to having a relatively high level of self-esteem.

A self-esteem questionnaire was distributed to two Atlanta area domestic violence shelters. These questionnaires were administered by the researcher and/or shelter staff. The researcher found that there was no significant difference between the decision to leave an abusive relationship and the level of self-esteem. In fact, the majority of the levels of self-esteem were borderline as to whether there was the presence of a problem with self-esteem.

The conclusions drawn from this study pointed to a need for more longitudinal studies, the need for more clear conceptual models, large scale data bases, and reliable instrumentation. The results of this study suggests that the level of self-esteem is not significant to a woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence affects women worldwide of all races and ethnic groups, ideologies, and income groups. Domestic violence is a social problem calling for social action including education, training, organizing, and lobbying for change. When working with this population of women who have been abused it is essential to look at the problems surrounding the event, the surroundings of the person, and any familial or community supports available to them.

The importance of violence against women as a national problem was acknowledged by Congress in its 1994 passage of the Violence Against Women Act as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and by President Clinton's establishment of an Office on Violence Against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice. Understanding the complex issues associated with a woman who has experienced abuse is difficult. Most cases have issues that go back several years and are deeply engrained in the ego, whether adaptive or maladaptive. There are still large gaps in our knowledge of the dimensions and effects of violence against women on the developmental process itself. Examining the extent of violence against women globally yields an appreciation of the magnitude of what it costs to the development process.

3Ibid., 6.
Violence against women is a major social problem in the United States. National surveys estimate that at least 2 million women each year are battered by an intimate partner, and crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) record about 1,500 murders of women by husbands or boyfriends each year. The Panel on Research on Violence Against Women was established by the National Research Council in 1995 to fulfill a Congressional request to develop a research agenda to increase the understanding and control of violence against women.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence National Clearing House for the Defense of Battered Women and the United States Department of Justice, it is estimated that every nine seconds a woman is battered in the United States. Every year over 4,000 victims of domestic violence are killed. Domestic violence is the number one leading cause of injury to women in the United States, exceeding the numbers of rapes, muggings, auto accidents and cancer deaths combined. Eighty five percent of all women with disabilities have been victims of domestic violence.

Social workers today have had to acknowledge that violence and coercion are a significant fact of life in the contemporary family, as elsewhere in modern society.

There is an increasing need for researchers who understand violence against women and

———


Ibid., v.


can put that understanding to work with practitioners to improve program design and evaluation. Social workers need to become increasingly involved in the research on domestic violence and all of its many facets, the evaluation of programs, and the implementation of programs; being especially sensitive to diverse ethnic populations.

Training is needed to prepare researchers and practitioners to meet the challenges of culturally competent research and interventions, by exposing them to the relevant literature, teaching qualitative research techniques as well as quantitative ones, and providing opportunities to interact with the communities they are studying or serving. Research on violence against women will be strengthened by a research infrastructure that supports interdisciplinary efforts and helps to integrate those efforts into service programs and institutional policies, especially in the area of preventive intervention.

Statement Of The Problem

The study of domestic violence and its effects on self-esteem is a relatively new and emerging field. Many researchers have concluded that levels of self-esteem have an affect on whether women choose to stay in or leave abusive situations. Aguilar and Nightingale determined that battered women are often described as having very low self-esteem and as feeling powerless to change their situation. Whether women of low self-esteem are likely targets for battering relationships or that battering relationships

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cause low self-esteem is not entirely clear. What is apparent, however, is that low self-esteem (whatever the cause) may contribute to the difficulty many women have in leaving battering relationships.\(^1\)

**Significance and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether the level of self-esteem is related to whether a woman leaves an abusive relationship or stays in an abusive relationship. Many researchers and practitioners have wondered if women who leave abusive relationships have higher levels of self-esteem than women who stay in abusive relationships. Terminating a battering relationship requires many situational and psychological changes that may be more difficult for women that have low opinions of themselves.\(^2\) The goal of this study is to begin to learn whether the level of self-esteem has an effect on the battered women’s levels of depression, fear and anxiety, and emotional attachment to their batterers and how to increase their feelings of personal control; by collecting and analyzing specific data about a sample of women who have at the present time left an abusive relationship.


\(^2\) Ibid., 35-36.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The abuse of women has been accepted throughout history and exists in all societies. In every major culture of the world there has been and is currently legal and cultural support for words and actions that keep women physically, emotionally and economically subordinate to men.¹ The culture of violence theory in which it is asserted that violence in particular cultures and/or families is a prevalent and accepted form of behavior which is learned as one grows up.²

Self-Esteem and the Battered Woman

The literature suggests that low esteem has been recognized by many as a common characteristic of women in abusive relationships.³ Terminating a battering relationship requires many situational and psychological changes that may be more difficult for women that have low opinions of themselves.⁴ Women are educated to view


⁴Ibid., 35-36.
their own self-esteem as linked to the ability to satisfy the needs and desires of others, and thus, see themselves as inadequate or bad if men beat them.\textsuperscript{5}

In their study of depressive symptomatology, self-esteem, and self-blame, Cascardi and O’Leary found that depressive symptomatology and self-esteem were highly correlated with the frequency, severity, and consequences of physical aggression. As the level of battering increased across the sample, depressive symptomatology increased and self-esteem decreased.\textsuperscript{6} Continued and repeated physical abuse seems to have a more lasting and dramatic effect on the self-esteem of these women than on their reported depressive symptomatology. In fact, low self-esteem has been found to be a vulnerability factor to the development of depression. And conversely, self-esteem enhancement has been related to lower levels of depressive symptomatology.\textsuperscript{7}

Human violence - be it a slap or a shove, a knifing or a shootout - occurs more frequently within the family circle than anywhere else in our society.\textsuperscript{8} Victims of battering suffer from a host of physical injuries, from bruises, scratches, and cuts to burns, broken bones, concussions, miscarriages, stab wounds, and gunshot wounds to permanent damage to vision or hearing, joints, or internal organs, to death. Bruises to the head, face, neck, breasts, and abdomen are typical.\textsuperscript{9} Sometimes blows are carefully


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 256-257.

\textsuperscript{8}Murray A. Straus et al., Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family (New York: Murray A. Straus & Richard J. Gelles, 1980), 201.

placed so that they do not show.\(^9\)

The repetition of a pattern of aggression can turn a woman into a fearful and confused person, who lacks confidence, experiences feelings of helplessness, and has difficulty making decisions on her own. Her work performance suffers, she is frequently absent and may risk losing her job. In the worst cases, a woman may find her situation so intolerable, she turns that aggression against herself and commits suicide.\(^11\) Studies from several countries find that escalation of violence undermines women’s self-esteem and their capacity to take action diminishes.\(^12\)

Violence against women is in direct contradiction to development goals. It disrupts women’s lives and denies them options. It undermines women’s confidence and sense of self-esteem at every level, physically and psychologically; and it destroys women’s health, denies their human rights, and undermines their full participation in society.\(^13\) Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of developmental goals in a variety of ways. First, it hinders the human development of women themselves. Women experience violence as a form of control that limits their ability to pursue options in almost every area of life from the home to schools, workplaces, and most public spaces.\(^14\) One of the clearest facts about violence against women is that it is


\(^12\)Ibid., 10.

\(^13\)Ibid., 8.

\(^14\)Ibid., 8-9.
detrimental to women’s physical and mental health, including women’s very survival.\textsuperscript{15}

The literature suggests that for social workers, lawyers and counselors trying to deal with domestic violence, one of its most perplexing and difficult features is the inability of many abused women to make a break from their violent home environment because they are bound by strong emotional ties to the abuser.\textsuperscript{16} Behind all this violence we repeatedly see evidence that both partners need each other, for whatever complicated reason.\textsuperscript{17} Whatever it is that binds them together - similarities in character, in background; qualities the other lacks and admires; shared needs; or even just familiarity - it is a powerful force that is not easily broken.\textsuperscript{18}

**Characteristics of an Abusive Relationship**

The battering cycle appears to have three distinct phases. These are: the tension-building phase; the exploration or acute battering incident; and the calm-loving respite.\textsuperscript{19} There is no definite time of each phase. During the tension building phase, the woman makes great attempts to accommodate the batterer. Phase two is characterized by the uncontrollable letting go of the tension that was in phase one (physically or verbally).

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 10.


\textsuperscript{17}Jean Renvoize, Web of Violence: A Study of Family Violence (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 37.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 48.

Phase three is characterized by loving and kind behavior by the batterer. He tries to make up for what he has done. This is the calm period.  

Why would a man physically or verbally abuse a woman he loves? There can be no simple answer to that question because human interactions and behaviors are so complex. Table 1 lists the reasons why a man batters a woman he loves. In reviewing the literature there are three characteristics that are important for violence by the husband, but not for violence by the wife. These include: (1) the husband being dominant in family decisions; (2) the wife being a full-time housewife; and (3) the wife being very worried about economic security. There are three characteristics which are particularly important for violence by wives but not for violence by husbands. These are (1) growing up in a family in which their own mother hit their father; (2) being physically punished after age thirteen; and (3) being employed outside the home as a manual worker. Table 2 presents the traditional views of the male versus the female image which may lead to some battering incidents. The physical abuse of women has been taken for granted universally as part of the natural order of male dominance over women.

The actual physical assaults are only one cause of the psychic damage experienced by women. Many battered women explain that waiting and wondering what

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22 Ibid., 207.

Table 1. Characteristics of a Batterer

* He wants to control her
* He's afraid he's weak, so he acts tough
* He knows she won't tell
* He doesn't think he'll be punished, if she does tell
* Society has not taught him that battering is a crime
* His father battered his mother, so it doesn't seem wrong
* His parents battered him, so it doesn't seem wrong


Table 2. Male versus Female Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Image</th>
<th>Female Image</th>
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<tr>
<td>* self confident</td>
<td>* very emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* forceful</td>
<td>* fearful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* able to control and hide emotions</td>
<td>* passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* active</td>
<td>* homebound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* fearless</td>
<td>* physically weaker than men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* physically tough</td>
<td>* easily led by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* good at sports</td>
<td>* dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* adventurous</td>
<td>* lacking self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* wise to the ways of the world</td>
<td>* very interested in clothing,</td>
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<tr>
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<td>hair styles, make-up</td>
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will set off the next incident is even more damaging than being hit. Battering can begin at any time during a relationship and continue throughout it. Clinicians note that battered women tend to resemble other patients characterized by agitated depression. Victims of battering tend to report physical problems such as backaches, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems. Fatigue, restlessness, loss of appetite, and sleep problems are also common. Couples in which violence occurs have been found to exhibit more negative affect and content in their interactions and more disagreements in problem solving than comparable nonviolent couples.

The myth that violence and love do not coexist in families disguises a great irony about intimacy and violence. Table 3, on the next page, discusses some of the myths centered around battering relationships. Sometimes, the very characteristics that make the family a warm, supportive, and intimate environment also leads to conflict and violence.

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29 Ibid., 78.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth No.</th>
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<tr>
<td>No. 1:</td>
<td>The battered woman syndrome affects only a small percentage of the population</td>
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<td>No. 2:</td>
<td>Battered women are masochistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3:</td>
<td>Battered women are crazy</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. 4:</td>
<td>Middle-class women do not get battered as frequently or as violently as do poor women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 5:</td>
<td>Minority-group women are battered more frequently than Anglos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 6:</td>
<td>Religious beliefs will prevent battering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 7:</td>
<td>Battered women are uneducated and have few job skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 8:</td>
<td>Batterers are violent in all their relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 9:</td>
<td>Batterers are unsuccessful and lack resources to cope with the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 10:</td>
<td>Drinking causes battering behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 11:</td>
<td>Batterers are psychopathic personalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 12:</td>
<td>Police can protect the battered women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 13:</td>
<td>The batterer is not a loving partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 14:</td>
<td>A wife batterer also beats his children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 15:</td>
<td>Once a battered woman, always a battered woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 16:</td>
<td>Once a batterer, always a batterer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 17:</td>
<td>Long-standing battering relationships can change for the better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 18:</td>
<td>Battered women deserve to get beaten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 19:</td>
<td>Battered women can always leave home</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. 20:</td>
<td>Batterers will cease their violence “When we get married”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 21:</td>
<td>Children need their father even if he is violent - or, “I’m only staying for the sake of the children</td>
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Ethnic Factors

In their study of Spousal violence among Anglos, Blacks, and Mexican Americans, Neff, Holamon, and Schluter found that very little empirical data is available regarding family violence in different racial or ethnic groups. Existing studies consistently indicate higher rates of both husband and wife abuse among Blacks than Whites, though data on the prevalence and determinants of violence in other racial and ethnic minority groups are needed. Socioeconomic differences (lower levels of education, occupation, income, and higher rates of unemployment found among Blacks) have been implicated in observed higher levels of spousal abuse among Blacks.

Many Black men feel, for good reason, that they have no power and little impact on the culture at large. Thus they are more likely to demand that their partners and family members treat them like a man and show them respect. Any challenge, any question from his partner can be interpreted as yet another attempt to chip away at his already insecure and fragile sense of self. Because of institutionalized and individual racism in American society, Black men, in particular, have experienced much of the powerlessness, low self-esteem, feelings of ineffectiveness and insecurity that characterize many abusive men.

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"Ibid., 3.


"Ibid., 23.
Neff et al., also found that more traditional sex role orientations were endorsed by minority individuals and males. Black women have been conditioned to repair the damage that has been done to Black families because they feel it is their responsibility to keep the family together. Changing strong, cultural patterns of behavior may be a very long and difficult process for both the woman and her partner. Evelyn C. White continues to tell us that:

Abused women have a tendency to put everyone's needs before their own. Because of our cultural history, this conditioning in Black women is particularly strong. Perhaps more than others, an abused woman is likely to hold traditional views about love, romance and relationships. Thus, when you are assaulted by the man you love, your beliefs and expectations about your relationship are shattered as well as your body.

**Finding A Way Out**

There are many ways to control people's minds. One way is to scare them into thinking they have no power. Another is to make people believe they are worthless. When they feel scared, helpless, and worthless, they won't try to make changes. Although it means freedom from their partner's violence, making the decision to leave

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[^36]: Ibid., 26.

[^37]: Ibid., 22.

their home will be hard. This is because any change, even a positive one, causes stress.\textsuperscript{39} All over the world, women are recognizing that for too long they have remained silent while their bodies and souls have been the innocent targets of violence.\textsuperscript{40} Most battered women do not leave home because they do not know where else to go. Often they do not want family and friends to know what they are going through. They may know that the home of a family member or friend is not safe either, since the abuser can follow them there.\textsuperscript{41} Women have always been the backbone of family life and have held the family together in the midst of tensions and changes. And yet, when a woman wishes to opt out of an abusive relationship, she is blamed for breaking the family unit.\textsuperscript{42}

Women who are being abused want the relationship they are in, but without the violence. Elizabeth Truninger identified seven factors that help explain why women do not break off relationships with abusive men. The reasons are:

(1) the women have poor self-concepts;
(2) they believe their husbands will reform;
(3) economic hardship;
(4) they have children who need a father’s support;
(5) they doubt they can get along alone;
(6) they believe divorcees are stigmatized; and
(7) it is difficult for women with children to get work.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{40}Aruna Gnanadason, No Longer A Secret: The Church and Violence Against Women (Switzerland: WCC Publications, World Council on Churches, 1993), 23.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 45.

Loving an abusive man makes it hard to leave, but not impossible. The most loving thing may be to separate, even if it's temporary. Nobody wants their loved one to continue a round of violence. If the relationship is also an addictive one, your course is clear. You'll need to end it immediately and totally. Follingstad et al., brings out that the self-report of battered women suggested that they viewed their physical health as beginning to decline during initial stages of their relationship even before the abuse began; it reached its worst level during the abuse and improved after the abuse.

Many battered women, including those who flee the most violent environments, are not permanently damaged victims of their husbands brutality. Women who arrive at shelters seeking refuge have already demonstrated self-sufficiency and an ability to take control of their lives. Those who seek help, flee batterers, or volunteer to participate in social research are not representative of the larger population of battered women. One obvious difference is that women who come forward may have endured more severe or frequent violence than women who do not seek help. Another plausible difference is that women who are willing to seek help or talk about their lives may have actually suffered less psychic damage than women who keep their victimization private.

Battered women seen in shelters and health care settings are often strong, creative, and assertive in contrast to the impression of passivity and psychological pathology given


"Tbid., 135."
by much of the popular and scholarly literature on abuse.\(^8\) Campbell et al. continued, from several studies, barriers to this process of leaving have been identified as lack of support from family and friends, continued threats of violence from the abuser, lack of employment and/or financial resources, and inadequate community assistance.\(^9\) In spite of serious physical and emotional problems resulting from abuse and the grief of a significant relationship in serious jeopardy, most women are able to either leave the abuser or find ways to make the current relationship nonviolent. The process of leaving and/or recovery may take an extended period of time, and helping professionals need not be frustrated if it does not happen instantaneously.\(^10\) From a decision-making perspective, higher levels of frequency and severity of abuse represent higher levels of cost associated with staying in that relationship. Since people try to minimize costs, they will be more likely to leave under these conditions.\(^\text{11}\)

Many abused women often use professional and community services as a way of dealing with the effects of abuse in their lives without identifying themselves as abused.\(^\text{12}\) The response of helping agencies to women who have been battered has been subject to criticism.\(^\text{13}\) In their study of the perceived helpfulness and use of professional services by


\(^9\)Ibid., 102.

\(^10\)Ibid., 110.


\(^\text{13}\)Ibid., 314.
abused women, Hamilton and Coates found that all of the women in the study used community services; and those women who spoke about their abuse with a professional service provider were asked first, to whom did they speak; secondly whether or not the contact was helpful; and thirdly, what types of responses were helpful or not helpful. With respect to emotional abuse, social workers, clergy and physicians were the professions most frequently contacted. With respect to physical abuse, police, social workers, physicians and clergy were the professions contacted. Concerning sexual abuse it was psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and police with whom the respondents had the most interaction. In examining helpfulness of professional groups, personal crisis counselors and social workers were mentioned most frequently as being helpful concerning all three types of abuse.

The most commonly utilized mode of intervention for women who have been abused is groupwork, offered in many shelters and community agencies so that victims may give and receive support. Support groups are considered the treatment of choice for battered women by most practitioners, partly due to the inappropriateness of other interventions when applied to the problem of domestic assaults. Groups reduce social isolation, one of the significant effects of being in an abusive relationship. They provide encouragement and support, allowing women to see that they are not alone in their

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*Ibid., 316-317.*

*Ibid., 317.*

*Ibid., 317.*


*Ibid., 327.*
experience, and that various options are available. Numerous authors have recommended that those who work with battered women adopt a feminist belief system which condemns violence, avoids assigning responsibility for the violence to victims, recognizes how the social institutions perpetuate violence, and focus on the violence itself in the initial stages of treatment.

Despite differences in individual women’s goals, there remain some general goals of battered women’s support groups which appear consistently in the literature. Guidelines suggest several common focuses for the work of support groups:

(1) The future safety of the woman.
(2) Recognition of violence for what it is, without denial or minimization.
(3) Reduction of self-blame and learned helplessness, and enhancement of self-esteem.
(4) An understanding of why battering occurs, including an exploration of sexism and the woman’s own beliefs about male-female roles.
(5) Opportunities for the ventilation of anger around being victimized and to express mourning and loss should the relationship end.
(6) Developing support networks which reduce isolation.

Social support networks are an important factor in battered women’s ability to recover from violence at the hands of their intimate (or formerly intimate) partners. Although battered women have been found to actively seek help and support from their friends, family, and community, this support has been reported to be inadequate much of the time. The amount, type, source, and quality of social support battered women possess

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Ibid., 328.
Ibid., 328.
Ibid., 328-329.

have also influenced their experience of violence as well as their psychological health and well-being.\textsuperscript{63}

It has been theorized that social support may either buffer an individual from stress, or directly increase the individual’s quality of life regardless of the individual’s stress level. Evidence suggests that supportive social networks are beneficial to women with abusive partners in helping them reduce the stressful impact of the violence they are experiencing. It is crucial that the social networks be supportive.\textsuperscript{64} Tan et al. did a study of the role of social supports for women exiting domestic violence shelters. The results of the study substantiated the strong relationship between social support and psychological well-being of battered women. Women who were more satisfied with their social support were also more likely to be satisfied with their quality of life and to be less depressed.\textsuperscript{65} Expanding and improving battered women’s social support networks is one means of helping buffer the stressors in their lives and improving their psychological health and well-being while they are moving through and beyond this crisis period.\textsuperscript{66}

**Theoretical Framework**

The theory most associated with the study of domestic violence is the Learned Helplessness Theory. The Learned Helplessness Theory has three basic components: information about what will happen; thinking or cognitive representation about what will happen (learning, expectation, belief, perception); and behavior toward what does happen. It is the second or cognitive representation component where the faulty

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., 437-438.

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 438.

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid., 447.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., 449.
expectation that response and outcome are independent occurs. This is the point at which cognitive, motivational, and emotional disturbances originate. It is important to realize that the expectation may or may not be accurate. Thus, if the person does have control over response-outcome variations but believes she/he doesn’t, the person responds with the learned helplessness phenomenon.® Thus, in applying the learned helplessness concept to battered women, the process of how the battered women becomes victimized grows clearer. Repeated batterings diminish the woman’s motivation to respond. She becomes passive. Secondly, her cognitive ability to perceive success is changed. She does not believe her response will result in a favorable outcome, whether or not it might. Next, having generalized her helplessness, the battered woman does not believe anything she does will alter any outcome, not just the specific situation that has occurred. She cannot think of alternatives. Finally, her sense of emotional well-being becomes precarious. She is more prone to depression and anxiety.®

Terms and Definitions

Battered Woman - A battered woman is a woman who is repeatedly subjected to any forceful physical or psychological behavior by a man/woman in order to coerce her to do something he/she wants her to do without any concern for her rights. Battered women include wives or women in any form of intimate relationships with men/women. Furthermore, in order to be classified as a battered woman, the couple must go through the battering cycle at least twice. Any woman may find herself in an abusive relationship with a man/woman once. If it occurs a second time, and she remains in the situation, she is defined as a battered woman.®

Battering - Battering means punching, hitting, striking - the actual physical act of one person beating another.

®Ibid., 43.
Abuse - May include physical assault, but it also covers a wider range of hurtful behavior. Threats, insulting talk, sexual coercion and property destruction are all part of abuse.

Domestic Violence - A general term used to describe the battering or abusive acts that occur within intimate relationships.70

Hypothesis

Self-esteem is an important evaluative aspect of self-concept, containing both cognitive elements in the form of self evaluations and affective elements concerning how one feels as a result of the evaluations.71 During the course of this research the following hypothesis will be addressed: Women who leave abusive relationships will have a high level of self-esteem. Since increased abuse is related to lowered self-esteem, a decrease in abuse should be related to heightened self-esteem.

Variables

Self-esteem will be measured using an Index of Self-Esteem, which is a questionnaire especially designed to measure the severity of self-esteem problems. The decision to leave an abusive relationship is already in place as all of the women answering the questionnaire are in a domestic violence shelter, and have been for at least one night.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study was taken from a population of two Atlanta suburban Battered Women's Shelters. Shelter 1 is located in College Park, GA and Shelter 2 is located in Decatur, GA. This sample consisted of women who have left abusive relationships and have been at the shelter for at least one night. This population was chosen because they have left the abuser. The research design chosen for this study was one of descriptive statistical analysis. This research design was chosen because of the lack of randomization of the research participants.

These women were administered the Index of Self-Esteem questionnaire at least one day after arriving in shelter. The questionnaire was administered to the women by shelter staff and/or the researcher. All of the women in the shelter were administered the questionnaire. Verbal informed consent was obtained before the questionnaire was given. Included were statements regarding the project and why the information was being collected, and the anonymity of the respondent. The shelter staff and/or the researcher would meet with the ladies briefly and ask them to fill out the questionnaire. The staff member and/or the researcher would then retrieve the questionnaire from the resident. Demographic information was obtained by a face sheet attached to the questionnaire that asked the clients their race, age, number of children, occupation, highest grade completed, time in relationship, husband's/boyfriend's age and occupation. An additional question, "What is it like to live in your family," was asked to gain clarity into the everyday lives of these woman affected by violence in the home.
Index of Self-Esteem

Self-Esteem will be measured using Walter Hudson’s Index of Self-Esteem (ISE) to measure the degree, severity, or magnitude of self-esteem problems. The ISE has an internal consistency reliability of .90 or better. This questionnaire is also proven to have excellent face, concurrent, and construct validity. The ISE is a closed-ended 25 item questionnaire, in which each question is rated on a seven point scale ranging from 1= None of the time, to 7= All of the time. The lowest possible score is 0, the highest 100, and higher scores indicate greater magnitude of a problem. In other words; the lower the score the higher the level of self-esteem, and the higher the score the lower the level of self-esteem. To minimize response set bias the scale contains some “reverse-scored” items.

To score the scale these steps must be followed:

1. Reverse-score all the items noted at the bottom of the scale
2. Add up all the items that were reverse-scored
3. Add up all the items that were not reverse-scored
4. Add these two sums together
5. Subtract the number of properly completed items
6. Multiply this figure by 100
7. Divide this number by the number of items completed times 6 (if these items are answered on a 7-point scale and 4 if they are answered on a 5-point scale)
8. The final number is the client’s score on the scale

The ISE has a clinical cutting score of approximately 30. People who score over 30 generally have been found to have problems in their level of self-esteem, while people who score below 30 have been found not to. The cutting score should be used with caution and further research is needed to completely validate it. It would be better to consider a range of values from 25-35 as a gray area that indicates the possible presence or absence of a problem. The particular gray area is based on the fact that the standard
error of measurement for this scale is approximately 5. If a score falls below 25 it
probably indicates the absence of a problem, and a score above 35 probably indicates the
presence of a problem.

Information for the Index of Self-Esteem questionnaire taken from:
Martin Bloom, et al., *Evaluating Practice: Guidelines for the Accountable Professional*
CHAPTER FOUR
PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Of the 45 questionnaires distributed between the two shelters only 26 were returned completed. Shelter 1 returned 22 questionnaires out of 25, and Shelter 2 returned 4 questionnaires out of 20. 22 of the respondents were Black while the other 4 were White. The average age of the respondents was 32 (31.80) years old. The minimum age being 18 and the maximum age being 49, with a range of 31 years. There was a relatively high percentage of women in their thirties.

The women had an average of 2 children, ranging from 0 to 6 children per resident. 12 of the respondents were employed at the time of the questionnaire. The average grade completed by the respondents was the twelfth grade. The average time spent in the relationships was 5 years. 4 months being the shortest time and 28 years being the longest time, with most if not all of the months/years enduring abuse. Of the 26 questionnaires completed only 1 was a woman being abused in a same sex relationship.

Figure 1, on the next page, presents the scores of the data collected on the Self-Esteem questionnaire. The mean score was 36.942, which falls just outside of the gray area that indicates the possible presence of a problem with self-esteem. The scores on the test ranged from 4.66 indicating the absence of a problem, to 79.33 indicating the presence of a problem. The scores on this test were found to be statistically insignificant; therefore, the null hypothesis has to be accepted.
Figure 1: Index of Self-Esteem Scores
Discussion

The present investigation found that women who have recently left abusive relationships experience lower self-esteem than expected. Psychologically, the combination of dominance and violence in these relationships may evoke symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, numbing, nightmares, flashbacks, and chronic fear and anxiety in victims.¹ These effects can be longer lasting than expected. Only in the last 25 years has public scrutiny begun to shine a spotlight on private violence that takes place behind closed doors.² Research into this personal area of human relationships can prove to be very difficult.

Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations this researcher found was the inability to get more questionnaires filled out. Another is that the researcher was present only at one of the shelters during the time the questionnaires were being filled out, so if any questions arose at the shelter that this researcher was not at there could be inconsistencies in the understanding of the questionnaire. This researcher was not able to get enough questionnaires back to be able to throw out the highest and lowest score in order to come up with a more accurate self-esteem level. The questionnaire should have been administered twice for comparison of the data, but with such a highly transient population this proved to be impossible. In addition, lack of random assignment and the absence of a control group were major limitations of the study.


CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study concerned itself with whether there would be a correlation between the level of self-esteem and the decision to leave an abusive relationship among women who, at the time of the study, resided in a shelter for victims of domestic violence. This researcher believed that the women would have relatively high levels of self-esteem. What this researcher did find though was that the level of self-esteem had no significant impact on whether women left the relationship or not because most of the participants appeared to have no self-esteem problem. In fact, in talking with many of the women their self-esteem appeared to be very high while others appeared to have a very poor self-concept.

Violence against women in their homes is a major problem that has only recently begun to be addressed in the public arena. For many years people considered domestic violence to be a personal problem. They have begun to realize that this very personal problem affects the society as a whole. Children do not function well in school, women may began to miss more days off of work due to the violence, and the violent partner may be jailed. Many of the women in this study have given up on dreams that they once had. Many of their children, who at one time were doing very well in school, now have behavioral problems. One important factor to consider is that this violence tends to cross generational boundaries. That is, a boy who has seen his father abuse his mother may in turn abuse his wife. A girl who witnessed the abuse of her mother may in turn accept this form of a relationship and herself be caught in the cycle of violence.
It is very important to intervene on different levels. In the home, in schools, in churches, on the job, and in any other private or public arena. Because these women still love their abusive partners it is very hard for them to leave, but each one has reached their level where they have said enough is enough.
CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The problem of violence against women has gained increasing attention in recent years, but the scope and magnitude of the problem are the subjects of on-going debates. Furthermore, this field of research is characterized by the absence of clear conceptual models, large-scale data bases, longitudinal research, and reliable instrumentation. Dwyer et al. recommends that without longitudinal studies, it is not possible to document the efficacy of existing social welfare services for victims of domestic violence. One useful outcome of longitudinal studies might be mechanisms for tracking victims of domestic violence and identifying possible abusive situations for purposes of prevention. Aguilar and Nightingale add that longitudinal studies examining possible changes in self-esteem that occur when bettered women terminate their abusive relationships are needed. Data from such investigations could: (1) provide critical information in our attempt to gain a better understanding of the factors that are associated with lowered self-esteem.


2Ibid., 144.

self-esteem, and (2) assist us in the development and implementation of heuristic intervention.

It is also important that abused women be assessed for self-blame and depression as signs of severe emotional responses to abuse if not as predictors of eventual outcome. Although the strengths of battered women should be recognized by helping professionals, these women's very real problems and the necessity for system change are also part of the reality. There also needs to be a promotion of female human rights, specifically as it is related to domestic violence. Research needs to be done on the link between social support from the community and the deterrence of spousal abuse. The translation of a public belief that wife beating is a private matter into action that makes it a public (and criminal) matter constitutes a central thrust in the efforts to curb this form of serious violence. The company of other women who have gone through a similar trauma can be highly therapeutic. The abused woman identifies with the other women and begins to develop self-esteem, along with the hope that she too can free herself and change her relationship with others.

Social workers are also biased in the way they view women who are victims of domestic violence. Therefore, findings for practice include use of systematic assessment and intervention approaches that decrease the potential for personal bias. Social workers

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should examine their own beliefs about family violence and make sure that fact and
knowledge rather than personal beliefs or bias form their professional judgements.9

Domestic violence has become woven into the fabric of society, and to prevent it
we must be prepared to alter fundamentally the core values, norms, and allocation of
resources that contribute to the harmful extent of violence in the home.9 Prevention
policies and programs must be directed at the two factors that make it possible for people
to abuse and maltreat those they love. First, we need to eliminate cultural norms and
values that accept violence as a means of resolving conflicts and problems in families.
Second we must develop programs and policies that support families and reduce internal
and external stresses and inequalities.10

9Ibid., 102.

9Richard J. Gelles & Murray A. Straus, Intimate Violence: The Definitive Study
of the Causes and Consequences of Abuse in the American Family (United States:

10Ibid., 194b.
APPENDIX A

COVER LETTER

Dear Participant:

Thank you for taking time to fill out the information contained in this packet. I am a student at Clark Atlanta University writing my thesis in fulfillment of receiving my Master’s Degree in Clinical Social Work with Children and Family. By filling out this questionnaire you will help me in obtaining information on the Effect of Self-Esteem on a Woman’s Decision to Stay In or Leave an Abusive Relationship.

Thank-You,

Crystal Morgan, BSW
Clark Atlanta University
School of Social Work
1998 Master’s Degree Candidate
APPENDIX B
FACE SHEET: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

FACE SHEET
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Race:
Age:
Number of Children:
Occupation:
Highest Grade completed:
Time in Relationship:
Husband’s/Boyfriend’s Age:
Husband’s/ Boyfriend’s Occupation:

What is it like to live in your family? (You can use the back if necessary)
APPENDIX C
INDEX OF SELF-ESTEEM

INDEX OF SELF-ESTEEM (ISE)

Name: ____________________________  Today’s Date: _______________________

This questionnaire is designed to measure how you see yourself. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by placing a number beside each one as follows:

1 = None of the time
2 = Very rarely
3 = A little of the time
4 = Some of the time
5 = A good part of the time
6 = Most of the time
7 = All of the time

1. I feel that people would not like me if they really knew me well.
2. I feel that others get along much better than I do.
3. I feel that I am a beautiful person.
4. When I am with others I feel they are glad I am with them.
5. I feel that people really like to talk with me.
6. I feel that I am a very competent person.
7. I think I make a good impression on others.
8. I feel that I need more self-confidence.
9. When I am with strangers I am very nervous.
10. I think that I am a dull person.
11. I feel ugly.
12. I feel that others have more fun than I do.
13. I feel that I bore people.
15. I think I have a good sense of humor.
16. I feel very self-conscious when I am with strangers.
17. I feel that if I could be more like other people I would have it made.
18. I feel that people have a good time when they are with me.
19. I feel like a wallflower when I go out.
20. I feel I get pushed around more than others.
21. I think I am a rather nice person.
22. I feel that people really like me very much.
23. I feel that I am a likeable person.
24. I am afraid I will appear foolish to others.
25. My friends think very highly of me.

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1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 21, 22, 23, 25

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


