

# Profiles of Women Survivors: The Development of Agency in Abusive Relationships

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Systematic analysis of interview data for 6 African American and 4 European American women who were survivors of battering and who are marginalized in society indicated that the women used active strategies (e.g., social support resources) to preserve their sense of self and agency within the conditions of violence. Previous experiences of abuse and early entry into relationships made the women more vulnerable to abuse, and limited economic resources, high levels of stress, social norms, and lack of support resources contributed to the women's feeling of entrapment in their relationships.

*Someone is beating a woman. Century on century,  
no end to this. It's the young that are beaten.  
Somberly our wedding bells start up the alarm.  
Someone is beating a woman.*

(Voznesensky, 1982)

Domestic violence is a reality experienced by 21% to 39% of all women during adulthood (Bradley, Smith, Long, & O'Dowd, 2002; Browne, 1993; Mazza, Dennerstein, Garamszegi, & Dudley, 2001). It is estimated that 20% of emergency room visits for trauma and 25% of homicides of women involve intimate partner violence ("Prevalence," 2000). Given the high prevalence of abuse and the severity of such trauma, recovery from domestic violence is a significant concern for the counseling profession. Increasing professionals' understanding of how women endure abuse and the resources they rely on for strength is an important contribution to clinical practice.

Some women who have been battered exhibit an impressive ability to survive, cope, and protect their children and even to leave the abusive situation to start a new life. This sense of agency may be defined generally as a condition of individualization and self-affirmation, involving an individual's efforts to exert power and influence within her surroundings (Bakan, 1966). Advocates in battered women's shelters have long observed women's capacity to endure, despite hardship. Thus far, the literature has not provided a conceptual framework for understanding how battered women of diverse ethnic backgrounds move beyond their abuse and what resources they rely on for strength. The literature provides some support for possible resources that may form the basis of such a conceptual framework. These resources include social support, coping styles, spirituality, and social and cultural factors.

Perceived social support has emerged as one of the most significant, active coping processes for survivors of trauma (e.g., Lam & Grossman, 1997; O'Connell Higgins, 1994). Battered women perceive that they have lower levels of social support than their nonbattered counterparts have (Barnett, 1996; Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002). In addition, perceived professional social support (e.g., clergy, medical personnel, social workers) may be a significant factor in a woman's decision about whether to stay or remain with an abusive partner (Barnett, 2001; Bowker, 1988) and the risk of subsequent abuse (Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). The absence of interpersonal and professional social support has also been shown to predict the extent of self-blame held by women survivors (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Barnett, 1996) and the severity of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Perrin, Van Hasselt, Basilio, & Hersen, 1996).

Spirituality appears to be an additional, seldom measured but significant resource for women's coping (Dunbar & Jeannechild, 1996; O'Connell Higgins, 1993), perhaps especially for women of color (e.g., Dunbar & Jeannechild, 1996). For example, in Dunbar and Jeannechild's study, nine of the participants attributed their ability to cope and to eventually leave the relationship to their spiritual beliefs. Some evidence suggests, however, that women may make a distinction between their spiritual beliefs and religious involvement. Bowker's (1988) study of 148 battered women showed that a significant number of women felt "trapped by their religion" (p. 234) or the social expectations to stay together and, therefore, took longer to leave an abusive relationship.

The literature also shows that coping style is another resource that can explain women's resiliency. Evidence suggests that cultural background may have an effect on the

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choice and perceived effectiveness of the coping strategies used by battered women (Yoshihama, 2002). Traditional definitions of coping, depicting “active” coping as observable, behavioral efforts and “passive” coping as unobservable, cognitive, or emotional efforts, may not fully capture the complexity of battered women’s survival strategies. Some research has suggested that women may engage in a type of “relational coping,” which might initially appear to be passive and helpless but upon closer examination represents an active survival strategy (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1993; Lempert, 1996). For example, in the context of abuse, Kirkwood (1993) found that women adapted their behavior and perceptions to the circumstances in which they found themselves in order to minimize emotional and physical injury.

Finally, some research has indicated that previous experiences of abuse may have a negative effect on a woman’s ability to be resilient (e.g., Breslau, Davis, & Andreski, 1995; Hoff, 1990; Messman-Moore, Long, & Siegfried, 2000; Mitchell & Hodson, 1986). For example, Mitchell and Hodson found that women with higher exposure to childhood violence waited longer before talking with anyone about the battering relationship.

Before concluding this review of the literature, it is important to briefly consider intersecting social and culturally specific dimensions that aid in understanding how women become entrapped in, move away from, and survive abusive relationships. These dimensions may provide additional explanation for understanding how certain groups of women react to violence and how perpetrators maintain control and power in abusive relationships. As noted by Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993), the manner with which a woman in a battering relationship eventually addresses a problem will often be a compromise between what the context allows and what she is capable of accomplishing. Her actual performance may not accurately reflect her ability. For example, limited financial resources may affect a woman’s decision-making process concerning her ability to leave a battering situation (Strube, 1988; Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). In addition, similar experiences may be qualitatively different for different groups (Bohn, 1993; Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994; Torres, 1993). Living in poverty, for example, may be different for African American women (e.g., concentrated in neighborhoods and chronic) than for European American women (e.g., diffuse and transitory). In addition, belonging to an extended family may buffer against high levels of institutional racism (Carr, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1996; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994).

It is also important to recognize that violence and the threat of violence within relationships are gendered social acts. Straus (1976) identified a number of cultural beliefs that support and encourage violence against women: (a) greater authority of men; (b) the idea that male aggressiveness demonstrates male identity; (c) wife/mother role as the

preferred identity for women; and (d) male domination of the criminal justice system, which is often experienced as insensitive to battered women. These traditional values provide a powerful source for self-blame for many heterosexual, battered women. In addition, the context surrounding the psychological development of girls, focusing on affiliation and interdependence (rather than individuation) as signs of successful development, is significant for this discussion. Women’s sense of self develops within the context of relationship, thus the absence of intimacy signals a failure of self (Jordan, 1991).

In this article, I explore the experiences of women who are both survivors of battering and marginalized in U.S. society with the goal of generating a theoretical model of the processes the women perceived as being supportive of their ability to rebound from being abused. Using phenomenologically oriented, in-depth interviews with 6 African American and 4 European American women survivors of domestic violence, I provide an understanding of the personal constructs and processes that served a protective function and positively influenced their survival and coping. My goal in this study was to step outside my own limited cultural perspective and listen to and describe how a group of ethnically diverse, marginalized women gave meaning to their ability to survive highly traumatic situations. The overall purpose of this study was to increase the development and effectiveness of interventions with women of all backgrounds who experience battering but particularly with women who, by virtue of social class, ethnicity, race, or gender, are marginalized or who have relatively low social power. It is these women whose voices are so often left out of the existing body of research.

## Method

Because research in this area is in its infancy, a qualitative approach that elicits relevant patterns in the development of agency was chosen as a valid methodological approach. That approach allows for a systematic analysis of the components supporting women’s ability to endure abusive experiences. An interview method has been reported to be an effective way of investigating reactions to victimization (Blackman, 1989). This method is also consistent with one of the principal strategies recommended by Franz and Stewart (1994) for studying women’s lives, which is to identify “women’s agency in the midst of social constraint” (p. 21). In addition to studying the systemic and contextual factors that limit women, it is important to recognize and affirm the way that women, in particular marginalized women, take control or sustain agency in the midst of trauma or other challenging circumstances. It is these exceptional efforts to survive within the context of overwhelming difficulty that are often ignored by scholars and counseling professionals.

Further support for qualitative methods comes from scholars (e.g., Wyatt, 1994) advocating the integration of multicultural

issues in research on domestic violence. Wyatt argued that evaluations should be conducted of the perceptions and experiences of ethnic communities that experience violence in order to understand the effects of violence in a culturally relevant context. According to Wyatt, "Qualitative methods of data collection . . . are an optimal approach to understanding both problems and coping strategies" (p. 18). In sum, the use of qualitative methods in this research flows from both a feminist perspective and a multicultural one, which together recognize the importance of understanding experience from a woman's own point of view and sees each woman as the "expert" in naming and defining her reality and her relationships.

### Participants

Ten women residents of a transitional housing program who previously had been in abusive relationships agreed to participate in the study. They were a purposeful sample of convenience in that they were selected because of their experience of having been in and having made the choice to leave an abusive relationship and their desire to share that experience with other women (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990). The women had been out of the abusive relationship for at least 3 months and had been living in the housing facility for an average of 6 months. All of the women suffered at least moderate levels of life-threatening violence (e.g., beaten up, threatened with a weapon), and all had obtained an order for protection (OFP). Seven of the women reported PTSD symptomology at the diagnosable level, with the women as a whole reporting an average of 10 PTSD symptoms, as measured by the Posttraumatic Stress Scale for Family Violence (Saunders, 1994). Eight of the women indicated that their living environments had been stressful during the previous 2 years. Seven of the women also indicated that financial stress, along with parenting stress, created significant challenges for them (Dill & Feld, 1982).

The average age of participants was 35 years, and all of the women had children (mean number of children, 2) from their intimate relationships. All of the women had at least a high school education, with two women having completed an associate degree. All of the women were of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (mean monthly income, \$449) and were of nondenominational Christian religious backgrounds. Eight of the women indicated that they had experienced abuse (sexual or physical) in their families of origin, and 5 had experienced abuse in previous dating relationships. Alcohol, drugs, or both were identified as a contributing factor in the abuse experienced by 7 of the women. Nine of the women indicated that the abuse began during the first 2 years of the relationship.

### Interviews

Data collection, which took place over a 6-month period, was based primarily on in-depth interviews that lasted an average of 4 hours per participant on two occasions. A set of

open-ended research questions guided the initial interview (see Appendix for the first set of interview questions). Two pilot interviews with two professional staff members from the shelter, an African American and a European American who were both survivors of battering, preceded the initial interviews with the 10 participants. The pilot interviews provided the opportunity for critical feedback on my questions and manner of relating to the women. Slight changes were made in the set of questions (e.g., from use of the word "batter" to "abuse"; see the Appendix for the final set of initial interview questions). This open-ended approach allowed me to be highly responsive to individual differences in the women and to increase the immediacy and concreteness of the interview questions (Patton, 1990). During the first individual interview with each of the 10 participants, the women were asked to clarify and elaborate on responses, thus expanding my understanding of their experience of abuse. The goal was to understand the individual lives of the participants and their strategies for survival from their own perspective.

The second interview was conducted after initial analysis of the first set of interviews, from which I had developed a second set of more specific questions (see Appendix for the second set of interview questions). Tapes from both sets of interviews were transcribed verbatim. The second interview served as a check on the validity of the participants' accounts by providing an opportunity to verify what was previously said and to ask participants for further detail and clarification (Guba, 1978). An additional means of triangulation (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Patton, 1990) was an independent "audit" of the data by the research coordinator at a Minneapolis shelter program, who analyzed the data independently and developed a separate list of themes and patterns. An independent reviewer and I developed a final list of themes and patterns through a consensual process of comparison until a common set of themes and constructs emerged (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Consultation with an African American psychologist, who confirmed cultural interpretations of the data, was also completed.

### Impact of the Researcher's Cultural Identity

In conducting the interviews and analyzing the data, every effort was made to be sensitive to possible biases that I may have had related to my own cultural background (i.e., European American, middle-class, Christian), while immersing myself in the participants' own reported experience. An intentional effort was made to involve the women in the confirmation of the data and to therefore reduce possible bias through a collaborative construction of the interview texts (Fine, 1994). The goal was to listen authentically (Rappaport, 1990) to the women, inviting each one to dialogue about her experience.

### Analysis

The accounts of participants' lives were analyzed to understand their inner resources and active coping strategies. I

first conducted a case analysis using all of the data for each person before doing cross-case analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Patton, 1990). An iterative process was used to identify patterns or constructs; this process involved examining each individual narrative or case and then refining or modifying the patterns or constructs derived on the bases of subsequent cases (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

The language of the participants guided the development of code and category labels for survival and coping resources. Similar concepts or categories were “clustered” in groups. Contrasts and comparisons between concepts were also made to sharpen understanding and observation (Huberman & Miles, 1994). These codes and categories were systematically compared and contrasted, yielding increasingly complex and inclusive categories and patterns. Personal analytic and self-reflective memos were also included in the data corpus for analysis.

Codes, categories, relationships, and emerging patterns were sorted, compared, and contrasted until saturated, that is, until analysis produced no new categories or themes (Gilgun, 1990; Patton, 1990). The intended product of the analysis was the identification of patterns of agency, using a data display, in women of low social power who are battered (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The “conclusion drawing” involved uncovering meaning from displayed data (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 429).

## Findings

Although there were significant individual differences in the experiences of the 10 women interviewed for this study, a collective set of experiences characterized the process of entering, enduring, and surviving an abusive relationship. Five major themes are presented below. In addition, risk and protective processes were identified and contributed to a theoretical model of agency in women who are battered.

### Theme 1: Supportive Friends, Strangers, and Family Members

All of the participants characterized themselves as mostly isolated and alone during the abusive experience. Despite these feelings of being alone in their experience, most participants spoke of the support of one or more significant friends, family members, or helping professionals who were invaluable in helping them survive the abusive relationship. For example, one respondent said,

D. was a very, very close friend. She kept calling no matter how many times he told her to quit calling, to leave me alone, that I didn't want to see her. She knew he was lying and she kept calling and kept calling and I knew that if I could just get to her she would help me.

Another respondent said,

I couldn't really have friends, but I had one and anytime he would beat me up, she would come to the hospital and I would get beat up again because he would say she would say

I was telling her bad things about him. She helped as much as she could. She wasn't afraid of him.

One woman told how a group of young men tried to assist her outside a gas station and how important the incident was in rethinking her response to the abuse.

I ran in there and my husband ran in after me and he just kinda tried to break my back. And these guys from the Air Force pulled up and they were getting gas also. And I was screaming and hollering and they came in and beat his brains out and they called the police . . . That was the beginning of me trying to get help and [it] was totally against everything for me to go against him.

All of the women believed that the advocates they encountered at shelters offered them the strongest support. For example, one respondent said,

The more I got to talking to the advocates and seeing other battered women, you know, I felt better . . . I finally had somebody to talk to . . . Thank God for Harriet Tubman shelter.

### Theme 2: Internal Strength and Spiritual Resources

A protective factor described by 9 out of 10 of the participants as the most significant resource for helping them survive the abuse was faith in God or a sense of personal spirituality (as opposed to religiosity or religious involvement). The women reported having a sense of God's presence with them and their children during the abusive relationship, guiding them and offering a supportive, trusting relationship. An active prayer life was noted by many of the women as helping them survive the trauma and violence. For example, one respondent said,

God helped me get through a lot. It's like when you get to the point where there is nobody here . . . You have to find another way out and my finding another way out is to just pray. Truthfully, that's the only person I know. My mom can't help me. The police surely can't help me. The only person that [can] help me is God.

Many of the women also spoke of an internal strength and sense of hope in the future that helped them act to make a better life. According to one respondent,

I guess I can only speak about where I stand today and looking back. If I had not gone through everything that I've gone through, I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't be the person I am today. Instead of giving in and feeling sorry for myself about what's happened in the past, I try to use it to my advantage to maybe be a stronger person, a more capable person.

Another respondent said,

I know I have the ability to be more . . . and I did not want to be stuck with a plan like he had . . . I knew if I could get out of it, I could get a new start and I could do the best I could to change the situation.

Part of the women's internal strength also seemed to be generated from their strong sense of identity as mothers. For example, one respondent said,

What really made me survive, because I felt that I had a daughter . . . but it made me realize, you know that I got better things to think about. I got this girl that I got to take care of and she don't deserve, you know, to be seeing this. So I just have to make up my mind. Keep walking and don't look back. And so I did.

### Theme 3: Self-Agency in Surviving the Abuse

Although the women in the study reported powerful forces restricting their options and ability to make choices about their relationship, the participants also described active efforts to preserve their sense of self and agency within the conditions of violence. One respondent said,

You either give up and you just say this is how it's going to be and you let him do it; you get enraged before you kill him and you end up in jail; or you get enraged but like Tina Turner told Oprah Winfrey, you don't run half-cocked. You have a place.

Another respondent said,

I started to know his patterns; when he comes in the house he looks at the phone. He walks in the bedrooms. He walks in the laundry room. He would look for things in the garbage can. If I cooked chicken, he wants beef . . . I tried to beat him to the punch line so that he wouldn't beat me for stuff like that. If I had just hung up the phone, I would make sure the window was open so it would look like the air was blowing in by the telephone instead of the window being closed and [the phone cord] swinging like I had just got off the telephone.

Participants described carefully chosen methods that were used in an attempt to control the violence and keep themselves alive in often very dangerous domestic situations, using coping strategies that are generally regarded as passive along with traditional problem-solving strategies. According to one respondent,

I knew how to play into him, get him to go to sleep or try to get him to go to sleep. I cooperate. I get up and cook . . . whatever he wanted me to do. I experienced being upset and going against it . . . he broke down doors, bust windows . . . and I got tired of that.

In addition, participants agreed that leaving and safety were not equivalent; in fact, leaving was often understood as an invitation to increased violence and possible death. As one respondent recalled,

I remember being in a shelter and not being able to sleep. I remember watching windows for shadows like he knew where I was and he was going to get me. So I was afraid. I was more afraid of that than being without him.

A related finding is that the conviction to seek help and end the abuse seemed to be strengthened by the women's

ability to name their experience as abuse. The women frequently noted the support of advocates and shelter professionals who provided knowledge and language to label their abuse. One respondent described her experience in the following way:

I went into the battered women's shelter because I was beat up. Then, it was like, that's when they labeled you. It was like, okay I was abused. I still didn't know I was being abused. Now it's like I know what the word is now. I know what to call it. I'm not going to go back into this. If I didn't know, if I didn't have a label for it, I would have went back in the relationship. I would have felt it was fine.

### Theme 4: Feeling Trapped in a Cycle of Abuse

Many of the participants described feeling a sense of being trapped in their abusive relationships, despite significant efforts to improve or leave the relationship. One respondent said,

I've never had anyone do that to me. Relationships I've had in the past, if I even sensed there was a problem, way beforehand I would have left that person. But this person just came out of nowhere like the wind . . . I just got caught up in the middle of it and I couldn't get out of it because he threatened me so much.

A respondent said,

There's a lot of reasons why I stayed there, and you know, the fact that I had grown up in a family where the mom and dad was supposed to be together regardless of whatever happened. You were suppose to be together right through it.

Social and religious expectations seemed to have a significant effect on women's decisions about leaving their relationships. One respondent said,

I suppose I stayed being a good Catholic. I didn't want to go to hell . . . I remembered what my Mother had told me, "You know, you don't leave your husband." It just wasn't done. Not in my family.

Traditional values along with blaming tactics by the perpetrator may have provided a "powerful foundation" for self-blame for the women in this study. For example, one respondent said,

Each time something came up, I would try to talk about it. He would always turn the table around and say, "It's not me. I'm not the one doing this. It's you." And I buy into that a lot and I still kind of do. But then I would start thinking, was I crazy, so I would go see a psychiatrist because I didn't know for sure.

Another respondent said,

Even if I had a bunch of stitches across my face or I was broke all up . . . he'd come and be right by my side crying like he really cared and making people think he didn't do it. I'd be sitting there saying I got to get well and go home and take care

of my kids and my husband. It was my fault that I'm here [in the hospital] and to get back and get in my place.

The absence of institutional resources to provide assistance in the battering situation was a final factor that participants identified as significant in their feelings of being trapped in their relationships. Although they sometimes benefited from a few significant friends, family, or strangers who assisted them in crisis situations, the women's feeling of isolation was a common and predominant experience. Informal helping resources usually available to most women, such as family, friends, and neighbors, were largely absent or silent partners in the abusive situation. For example, one respondent said,

They're scared. Nobody wants to get involved. Everybody wants to keep things "hush, hush."

Women in this study who had used social service or counseling agencies gave them a fairly neutral evaluation. Other support resources used by the women, including police, district attorneys, and physicians and nurses, were also rated as largely ineffective in helping the women deal with or leave the battering relationship. For example, one respondent said of her interaction with the police,

I remember him cutting my hair off and putting a gun to my head and the police came in and told me there was nothing they could do. They looked at my father's gun that he had in the service and they were more concerned about why I had a gun in the house . . . They weren't really concerned with the fact that I was sitting there with no hair on my head and that he had choked me unconscious to do that.

Women rated clergy as lower on effectiveness than most other helping resources, whereas battered women's shelters were most directly helpful in combating domestic violence. Following is one respondent's assessment.

The pastor said, "What did you do? You must, even if you don't realize it, you must have done something to set him off." I was all black and blue and bloodied and I just went on and on and he kept saying, "Let me go find somebody." I finally just looked at him and said, "Look, this is your job, okay . . . and if I don't talk with you, I go down . . . You have to realize this is going on."

#### Theme 5: Previous Experiences of Abuse and Vulnerability at the Beginning of a Relationship

Eight of the participants had an earlier experience of violence or abuse that might have put them at further risk of entering into a battering relationship. One respondent said,

When I was a little baby about 3 years old I was molested by a male. I don't know if it was my uncle or a friend of my uncle's, but when I told my mom about it she didn't believe me.

One participant said,

I have a stepfather. He used to touch me and things like that. That's molestation. I could get that word out. I always felt like that experience has a lot to do with the type of woman that I am today.

A sense of shock and disbelief when their partners became abusive was a part of all of the women's experience of vulnerability. One participant summed it up this way:

I never expected it, not this person, anybody but this person, to ever say things like that to me. And I was so dumbfounded by him saying those things to me that I think I forgot what else was going on. So hitting me, I didn't feel it.

Another respondent said,

He slapped me . . . and I was shocked. I was so shocked and I couldn't believe that he did that. After that happened, I felt like I hurt his feelings and he got so upset and because he said he loved me and he slapped me again, I kind of just accepted it.

## Discussion

The finding that the battered women in this study experienced an almost complete absence of social support is quite consistent with previous research (e.g., Barnett, 1996; Carlson et al., 2002). However, one question that emerged from this study is, "What degree of support is necessary to be protective?" As in Barnett and LaViolette's (1993) study, participants indicated that the presence of even one supportive, encouraging person in their lives had a significant impact on their decision to take action and leave an abusive relationship. It is unclear whether a larger number of supportive persons in the lives of these women would have generated earlier or more decisive attempts to end their relationships. The lack of social support reported by the women in this study may have been particularly difficult for the African American women who are members of a community that traditionally places strong emphasis on meeting intimacy needs through extended kin and friendships (Carr et al., 1996; Howard, 1996).

Participants made a distinction between spiritual practices and beliefs, which they saw as protective, and participation in a religion or religious group; this distinction has not been described clearly in the literature. What has been noted is the existence of a sense of spirituality or faith (e.g., Dunbar & Jeannechild, 1996) or religiosity (e.g., Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993) in battered women who could be regarded as resilient. The use of spirituality as a source of strength and survival has been identified as particularly connected to the experience of African American people (e.g., Carr et al., 1996; Howard, 1996). Moreover, part of this internal sense of strength or a sense of worth for participants in this study appeared to be generated from their strong sense of identity as mothers. No comparable finding was found in the literature, and it is a possible explanation that merits further exploration.

Consistent with recent research (Bergen, 1995; Kirkwood, 1993; Lempert, 1996; Staroneck & Friedman, 1997), this

study found that participants developed strategies to try to minimize the violence and protect themselves from injury, sometimes by placating their partners, by “fighting back,” or both. These efforts to manage the violence and keep themselves alive in often very dangerous domestic situations can be identified as “survival skills” (Kirkwood, 1993) that serve a protective function in defining a woman’s sense of agency. These actions contrast with Walker’s (1979) learned helplessness theory and the Stockholm syndrome (Graham, Rawlings, & Rimini, 1988), which tend to typify women as fairly passive victims. An awareness of social context helps one recognize that coping strategies that are generally regarded as passive, such as avoidance, may actually be a very active means of trying to stop the violence.

As noted previously, the women in this study also experienced a significant number of stressors during the previous 2 years and reported fairly severe PTSD symptoms. Such high levels of stress-producing conditions, particularly financial difficulties, present significant challenges to women of low social power with limited available resources and few perceived or real options for coping effectively. These factors may be more significant for women of color, who are at increased risk for psychological and physical health consequences because of their double minority status as a person of color and a woman in American society (Hauenstein, 1996). Hence, the results indicating that, despite numerous obstacles, the women in this study were able to develop a sense of agency and leave their relationships are particularly meaningful in light of the multiple stressors they had to navigate because of their marginalized status. When viewed in this context, it is extraordinary and an affirmation of the women’s resiliency that they were able to make sense of, change, and leave their battering relationships while in the midst of the trauma of abuse and simultaneously navigating multiple other stressors.

The finding that the conviction to seek help and end the abuse seemed to be strengthened by the women’s ability to name their experience as abusive is consistent with other studies (Sedlak, 1988; Tift, 1993). The earlier absence of such language may have reinforced these women’s sense of alienation and initial silence about the abuse (Kirkwood, 1993). This finding validates studies by Lempert (1996) and Kelly (1988), who noted that battered women suffer from “definitional isolation” and may only begin to define the violence as such when, after prolonged and severe abuse, they begin speaking to a professional at a shelter or center for battered women.

Similarly, Bergen (1995) emphasized that women reach a critical point in the process of leaving a battering relationship when they begin to define violence as such. It is possible that the language and knowledge these women gained about the cycle of abuse validated their feelings of anger and doubts about the possibility of a positive future in the abusive relationship and supported their decision to leave. Such a conclusion would be consistent with NiCarthy’s (1987) research on battered women that found a connection be-

tween a decision to leave one’s partner and a loss of hope that a partner will change.

Results from this study also confirm previous findings that social and religious expectations that women are supposed to keep the family together and the societal positioning of women and children have an effect on women’s decisions about leaving their relationships (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Lempert, 1996). Traditional values, along with blaming tactics by the perpetrator, may be viewed as a risk factor for an abusive relationship (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1997). These values may provide a “powerful foundation” for self-blame for women (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Hoff, 1990; Tift, 1993).

The women’s rating of clergy as lower on effectiveness than most other help resources is also consistent with previous research, which has noted that battered women’s shelters were most directly helpful in combating domestic violence (e.g., Bowker, 1988; Gelles & Straus, 1988). In contrast to the work of Bowker, however, the 4 women in this study who had used social service or counseling agencies did not rate them as equivalent to battered women’s shelters in helpfulness but instead gave them a fairly neutral evaluation. One possible explanation for this difference is that African American battered women tend to use formal community organizations less than do White women and are more likely to look to informal networks for help (e.g., churches, family, and friends), as indicated in previous research (Coley & Beckett, 1988).

The finding that 8 of the women had an earlier experience of abuse supports what has been previously reported in the literature (Breslau et al., 1995; Dutton, 1992; Herman, 1992; Messman-Moore et al., 2000). Experiences of abuse appear to be a risk factor for further abuse. Breslau et al. found that a history of past exposure to traumatic events appeared to increase the risk of exposure to such events at follow-up 3 years later, independent of suspected risk factors. Similarly, Herman (1992) suggested that prolonged exposure to trauma may deepen a woman’s vulnerability to a sense of “captivity” and to PTSD. Dutton (1992) listed prior victimization as one of the susceptibility factors in her Posttraumatic Stress Reaction model for battered women. Mitchell and Hodson (1986) noted that women with high exposure to violence during childhood waited longer before talking with anyone about the battering situation.

An important word of caution, however, is that the suggestion that prior exposure to violence is a possible risk factor for a battering relationship does not imply that somehow women are at fault or responsible for the battering situation. Indeed, none of the studies referred to previously in this article drew such a conclusion. Hoff (1990) and others (e.g., Walker, 1979) refuted the notion that women’s psychopathology somehow causes the violence. Rather, such exposure may make some women more susceptible to the strategies of control, manipulation, and violence initiated and sustained by the batterer.

Some theorists, most notably Walker (1979), have referred to the experience of revictimization as learned helplessness, a condition that causes victims to narrow, based on a sense that they cannot predict what will protect them from further abuse, their alternatives in making decisions. Discussions of learned helplessness as an explanation for women's sense of powerlessness in abusive relationships (e.g., Walker, 1979) may not include other possible explanations for women's experience, which provide a broader explanation given the findings of this study. For example, as noted by Morrow and Smith (1995), the social and cultural contexts in which women exist, as well as specific cultural and family norms, influence the readily available options for problem-focused coping and/or the perception of the efficacy of these options.

## ■ Implications of the Study

### Counseling Practice

Being comfortable with examining the meaning of spirituality or religiosity is an important goal for counseling women who have been abused. Spirituality is an area that traditionally has been left for clergy and spiritual directors to explore; however, it is clear from this study that it is a highly significant resource for coping and an important factor in women's survival of abuse. Counselors need to be trained and gain experience in discussing and nurturing women's sense of faith and prayer life. Referring women to church or synagogue representatives who may not have knowledge or experience with issues of battering may be doing women a disservice.

Counselors need to recognize and affirm women's strengths and sense of agency in surviving abusive relationships. The actions that a woman takes to come through the abuse must be seen within the context of the power differential between her and the perpetrator, as well as her available resources. In addition, counselors should affirm women's identities as mothers by including discussions of the needs of children and extended family. An accurate assessment of women's response to the violence might include questions about both direct and indirect efforts to defend against and manage the violence and the women's concerns about their children and extended family members. Women who are in battering relationships may not readily reveal information about the abuse or may not have the language to name the experience. Depending on the intensity of the battering cycle and because they might feel isolated, overwhelmed, and confused, battered women may need a very supportive therapeutic relationship. Decisions about leaving an abusive relationship need to be considered very carefully, with safety as the primary consideration; the counselor should affirm and recognize that the client is in the best position to make decisions about her future and that of her children.

Counselors also need to be knowledgeable about how the cycle of abusive behavior unfolds and how women become trapped in the complexity of abusive relationships. It is critical for counselors to validate women's experiences of ma-

nipulation, control, and violence in their relationships and help them recognize the context around feelings of self-blame and shame. Counselors can assist women in reframing these feelings and posttrauma symptoms (e.g., avoidance behavior, hyperarousal, depression) as common reactions to the abuse. Counselors also need to help women counter blaming messages from the batterer and others by clearly placing the responsibility for the abuse on the perpetrator.

An important role for counselors as advocates is to identify available agencies and institutional resources that may be helpful to a woman in an abusive relationship. One important area within this resource group is increased awareness of career and educational opportunities, giving women more options for economic self-sufficiency. Counselors might also help prepare clients for any negative reactions they may receive from professional helpers, such as clergy or law enforcement representatives. It is crucial that women in abusive relationships be empowered to make their own decisions about which resources they will choose to use (e.g., whether to contact police, file for an OFP, go to a shelter).

Counselors need to be aware of prior abusive experiences as a possible risk factor in the client's future relationships and share this knowledge with their clients. Counselors have an important role in helping women assess the impact of previous abusive experiences and assisting women in choosing healthy, fulfilling relationships; they must do this while avoiding the danger of misinterpreting such effects as chronic psychopathology (Rosewater & Walker, 1985).

### Prevention and Training

The issue of domestic violence is a contextualized issue that has relational and social consequences as well as implications for the well-being and health of both individuals and the community. Hence, the results of this study have implications for the work of counselors, professional helpers, and trainers at both the remedial and preventive levels.

One implication of this study for the prevention of domestic violence is that additional resources are needed that focus on (a) training and education regarding the causes and impact of violence against women and (b) appropriate interventions for staff and faculty of schools and community and social institutions, including, legal, health care, religious, and social service professionals. Every school and community agency should be strongly encouraged to distribute information on the rights of and services for women who are battered and provide training to its professional staff on appropriate client services and referrals.

The goal of training and education about domestic violence is to ensure that counseling professionals respond sensitively to victims and provide needed resources while also recognizing women's own sense of agency and empowering them to take control of their lives as survivors. These professionals have an important role to play in fostering the environmental changes needed in the professional helping network to increase its responsiveness to the concerns of battered women.

They also need to be active participants in community, government, and school-based planning efforts that address systemic and societal factors contributing to or sanctioning domestic violence.

Another key is to hold perpetrators, not victims, accountable for the abuse. Legal interventions alone are clearly insufficient and often ineffective, falling at best into what Keeling (1997) identified as “self-defense” measures. Estimates are that only 14% of American women who experience severe violence ever contact the police (Gelles & Straus, 1988). Also, recent studies paint a bleak picture of the effectiveness of restraining orders, especially for the women who have long histories of being abused by their partner (Davis & Smith, 1995).

The entire community needs to be involved in establishing norms, traditions, and beliefs that make violence against women unacceptable behavior; these norms need to go beyond legal measures. These norms and traditions supporting nonviolence and cooperation begin in the earliest environment, the family home. It has been noted that experiences of violence in the family of origin are one of the most significant sources of subsequent violence (Tifft, 1993).

Primary prevention necessitates beginning at the level of children’s exposure to violence with such programs as problem solving, peace education, and conflict resolution for both children and parents. It also means a reorganization of work and family relationships reflecting gender equity and support for a minimal level of economic sustenance, including benefits such as health care and retirement. According to Krauss and Krauss (1995), improving family strength is a key factor in reducing the occurrence of family violence. They suggested several factors that strengthen families and in turn strengthen women’s resiliency, including extended community ties, delayed childbearing and marriage for women, shared parenting, family rituals, and honoring of elders.

Counseling professionals have a unique and important role to play in working to eliminate the societal norm that accepts violence as an appropriate response to conflict in families and relationships. Violence among intimate partners is clearly a social problem with deep roots in culture and the social organization of society. Nothing short of a broad public commitment to rethink social values and organization is needed to institute the structural changes that will reduce interpersonal violence and build stronger community ties that lead to the prevention of violence.

## ■ Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Like other qualitative studies, this research is not intended to result in the identification of causal relationships regarding the phenomena being studied. The findings related to the agency of this particular group of women in abusive relationships are not intended to be used to make generalizations about other groups of women. Although the 10 women who were the focus of this study represented the diverse com-

position of a Minneapolis transitional housing program for low-income battered women, they were a self-selected group recruited by professional shelter staff. It is not known if other women who are battered, are from similar socioeconomic background, and are using transitional services would be similar. Battered women who are less motivated to pursue life changes may not even enter a transitional program.

The limitations of time, resources, and available participants meant confining this study to 10 women. A larger and more diverse group of participants may have changed the results. Some members of the initial group of 10 women who were interviewed for the study left the program before the initiation of the second set of interviews. In order to confirm the initial findings with a full complement of 10 participants, other women in the transitional program, who provided data for the second confirmatory interviews, replaced the 4 members of the initial group who left the program. The omission of the confirmatory input from these initial 4 participants is a limitation of the study.

This study used an exploratory and open-ended approach to contribute to a theoretical model identifying women’s strengths and agency when experiencing the trauma of domestic abuse. More research is needed with other groups of women survivors of battering relationships, including women from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds (e.g., lesbian women) and from a range of socioeconomic groups to confirm and expand these preliminary findings.

These initial findings point to many areas that merit further investigation, including spirituality and other internal factors as survival resources in traumatic situations; the role of social support in surviving abuse; women’s efforts to preserve a sense of agency in abusive relationships; risk factors for abusive relationships, including previous abusive relationships and early marriage or intimate contact in relationships; the impact of social and cultural norms on women’s sense of agency in abusive relationships; the interaction of abuse with other chronic life stressors; and the availability and efficacy of professional helping resources for women who are battered.

In summary, it is important that the counseling profession continue to move away from a bias directed solely at problems and maladjustment and toward a focus on the human capacity to rebound and stay healthy, despite hardship (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Such a broadening of perspective serves to identify risk and protective factors that promote more positive outcomes for individuals and populations at high risk, such as women who are battered, while also providing (a) important information about appropriate methods to assist those who are survivors and (b) more effective treatment and intervention strategies.

The shift from a problem-focused model to a focus on protection and strengths has been described as the emergence of a new paradigm in counseling research (Bernard, 1991). Some scholars would describe this shift as a return to the historical roots of the counseling field, that is, focusing on a developmental, preventive model. The shift among counselors and educators to a perspective that

views women as active agents represents, fundamentally, recognition of the need for a holistic model of human development. It is a model that builds on strengths, not just problem areas; it recognizes that counselors have the potential to have an impact on the client or student on multiple levels and to prevent possible violence through the identification of risk factors. Such a framework poses enormous challenges in developing interventions and counseling strategies as professional counselors. Perhaps more deeply than ever before, the potential to significantly influence the client on multiple levels is emerging as the model for counseling interactions, offering opportunities for growth and change.

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## Appendix

### First Interview Questions for Women Who Were Battered

1. Tell me, as much as you are comfortable sharing with me right now, what happened to you when you were in the abusive relationship?
2. What are the primary ways in which you survived the experience?

### Second Interview Questions for Women Who Were Battered

#### I. History of the Abusive Relationship

1. Tell me more about how you entered into relationship with the man who became abusive. Young age? Inexperienced with dating? Became intense right away? Abuser grew up in abusive family?
2. How important were family and/or societal norms in keeping you in relationship?
3. How would you rate the impact of the following groups/organizations in (a) keeping you in the abusive relationship, (b) helping you to get out it?
  - 3.1 Police
  - 3.2 OFP
  - 3.3 Judges/District Attorneys
  - 3.4 Attorneys
  - 3.5 Medical Personnel
  - 3.6 Clergy/Churches
  - 3.7 Shelter system
  - 3.8 Counselor/Psychologists
  - 3.9 Other?
4. Many women describe a cycle of abusive behavior (describe cycle). How was your experience the same or different from this?
5. How did financial reasons make it harder for you to get out of the relationship? Did leaving the abuser mean losing "everything"?
6. Was it your experience that people who were friends, coworkers, acquaintances, or family members became silent or absent when your relationship became abusive? You felt isolated?
7. When did you first begin to name your relationship as abusive? What helped you to label it?
8. How would you compare the impact of the emotional and physical abuse on you?
9. Would you agree that no matter what anybody says, somehow the abuse was your fault?
10. To what extent was your experience one of feeling powerless and trapped in the relationship?

11. Was your experience one of feeling torn between hurt and feelings of love?
12. Did you experience a sense of "insanity" in the relationship?
13. At the leaving point, had you lost hope in the relationship? Did you experience a combined sense of intense anger and feelings of getting stronger? Felt like an escape that had to be carefully carried out, at the sign of an opening? Lost everything by leaving?

#### II. Coping and Strengths Identified by the Women

1. Was it your experience that you learned strategies to manage the perpetrator's violence, which sometimes worked to decrease the violence?
  - Knew when he would be abusive by look, tone, etc., and try to calm things down?
  - Refrain from saying things, speaking truth?
  - Learned what made the abuser angry and changed behavior (e.g., Stayed in house more)?
2. You were the main economic provider, nurturer of children, and source of stability of household?
3. You were isolated but found ways to let your feelings out, through journaling? Keeping a diary?
  - 3.1. God helped you through?
  - 3.2 Prayer?
  - 3.3 Faith or trust in God?
  - 3.4 A sense there is a reason for things?
  - 3.5 God as Father? Male?
  - 3.6 Talk with God/ Higher Power? Opened up my understanding?
  - 3.7 Asked God to change abuser or make situation change?
  - 3.8 Asked God to help me get out? Your choice vs. God's action?
  - 3.9 Sense relied on God because one of only things had left?
4. Going to church helped get you through?
5. Children helped you move out of relationship/stay alive? (e.g., wanted to see them grow up, they needed me, wanted to be a role model, etc.)
6. Anger helped me leave/ survive? Knew didn't deserve this, couldn't take it anymore?
7. Support people?
8. Learned to love myself? (e.g., I deserve better); Attitude: I don't care?
9. Use past for advantage to be stronger person? Did some good come out of the bad?
10. Sense life passing me by and I have ability to be more? Sense something better out there?
11. Sense that if you could get out of the relationship you could do your best to change the situation?
12. Dreams for self?

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