

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WHO STAY IN ABUSIVE
RELATIONSHIPS

A Thesis

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Abstract

The choice to stay a relationship affected with intimate partner violence (IPV) is not one that is well understood. IPV is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse against an intimate partner (Mason, Hyman, Berman, Guruge, Kanagaratnam, & Manuel, 2008). IPV goes beyond socioeconomic status and culture, and has a global prevalence of 20%, but the majority of research available does not take into account the reasoning for why women stay with an abusive partner. The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain an understanding for why women stay with abusive partners and to determine what eventually helped them to leave the relationship. The theory was developed by employing grounded theory methodology. Purposive and snowball sampling were utilized to recruit a sample of four adult female participants who had experienced IPV and had successfully left. The data was acquired through open-ended interviews, which were later transcribed verbatim. Coding the data has been done using open, axial, and selective coding recommended in Creswell (2007). Through the coding process, a model emerged for why women leave abusive relationships, and therefore, The Acknowledgement of Abuse model was formed. The model consists of three steps that can occur in any order for a woman to reach her breaking point, and leave the relationship. These steps include gaining education to acknowledge red flags, awareness of quality of alternatives, and realizing individual unhappiness. The information gained from this research can be used to help women leave abusive relationships.

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Understanding the Experiences of Women Who Stay in Abusive Relationships

The increasing prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) goes beyond socioeconomic status and culture (Chornesky, 2000). IPV has been defined as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse against an intimate partner (Mason, Hyman, Berman, Guruge, Kanagaratnam, & Manuel, 2008). For the purpose of this study, IPV will be defined as any form of abuse inflicted by a male partner to a female within an intimate relationship. Physical, sexual, and psychological abuse have been found to be equally damaging which is why the study will encompass all types (Mason et al., 2008). This study acknowledges that IPV can be present in married couples, homosexual couples, or where the male is the victim to abuse from the female. The majority of the literature looks at heterosexual relationships where the man is the abuser and the woman is the victim. This is because the abuse is often more prevalent and severe (Hines & Saudino, 2003). This study will expand the literature focusing on those relationships.

The majority of the research regarding IPV has looked at what has allowed women to leave abusive relationships and the few studies for why they stay have been quantitative. The quantitative research has identified predictors for why women stay that can be used as baseline assumptions for qualitative research. Using a qualitative approach allows for a subjective view of what the victims of IPV are going through, while also disclosing why they personally chose to stay with an abusive partner. Qualitative research allows for the acknowledgement of confounding variables that play a role in whether the individual stays in or leaves the relationship (Creswell, 2007). Utilizing a qualitative approach, I believe I gained a better understanding of the women's personal experiences, which assisted me in forming a theory. Finding the courage to leave an abusive

relationship is extremely difficult, and because I have witnessed different friends and family members feel trapped I know how important it is to pursue research in this area and help the victims to leave. I decided to use stories from survivors of abusive relationships to get a subjective explanation for why they stayed in the relationship and what eventually allowed them to leave.

There are a multitude of reasons why I believe this research is important. Although I myself have never been in an abusive relationship, I have a couple close friends that have, and I have witnessed firsthand the negative effect it had on their wellbeing, mental health, and life satisfaction in general. If they had access to help, involving how to leave an abusive relationship, I believe there would have been less negative consequences for their lives overall. I realized that there is more to be done to help victims of IPV and I wanted to be apart of assisting them to leave their relationships earlier on.

Literature Review

Definition

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is the most common type of violence against women. IPV is most often committed on a woman by a man within a dating relationship (Hines & Saudino, 2004). According to Straus (2004), dating is a relationship that involves meeting for social interaction with a goal to continue the relationship until one or both of the parties decide to end it or further steps towards a more committed relationship ensues. IPV can consist of physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse from an intimate partner (Mason et al., 2008). Physical abuse includes any physical violence such as slapping, pushing, kicking, dragging, choking, or threatening to use

using a gun or knife. Sexual abuse includes physically forcing a woman to engage in a sexual act that she did not provide consent for. This can include unwanted sexual touching, sexual degradation, or forced intercourse (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise & Watts, 2006). Financial abuse is a subset of psychological abuse that occurs when the abuser controls the finances to maintain power over his partner (Mason et al., 2008). Another form of psychological abuse is when the abuser restricts the woman's contact with other people and insists on knowing where she is at all times (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). Psychological abuse can also include verbal insults, extreme jealousy, and restricting his partner's freedom (Mason et al., 2008). It is often difficult for a woman in an abusive relationship to recognize the abuse because IPV can be a combination of the forms of physical, sexual, and psychological and can occur at varying levels depending on the extent of the abuse (Patzel, 2006).

Prevalence

Straus (2004) found that dating couples are more likely to be violent than married couples and that there are especially high rates of physical violence among university students in dating relationships. This is likely due to the fact that individuals are more likely to leave the relationship when the two people are just dating rather than married because there is a lesser degree of commitment to the relationship (Rusbult & Marz, 1995). In these situations women are overwhelmingly found to be the victims of IPV in heterosexual relationships (Hines & Saudino, 2003), which is why this paper will focus on female victims in heterosexual relationships. In Canada and the United States, 20-40% of university students reported one or more accounts of IPV in a 12-month period (Straus, 2004). This is comparable to studies that looked at IPV around the world and found that

10-52% of women cross culturally have reported physical abuse by their partner and between 10-30% of women that have reported sexual violence by a partner (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). These statistics do not include the women who have not reported the abuse due to fear or lack of knowledge that they are being abused (Patzel, 2006).

Theories on why women stay

Personality type. Women with a specific personality type are more likely to stay and tolerate abuse (Hebert, Silver & Ellard, 1991; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). The specific personality type encompasses individuals who have low self-confidence and tend to self-blame or even suffer from depression (Hebert et al., 1991). Rhodes and McKenzie (1998) added that an individual who is more maladjusted or unable to deal with the demands of a normal social environment would be more likely to stay in an abusive relationship. Someone who suffers from low self-esteem is also more likely to stay in an abusive relationship because there is a feeling of entrapment due to the belief that they “cannot do any better” than the present relationship they are in (Hebert et al., 1991; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; Rusbult & Marz, 1995). A woman with low self-esteem has low personal power (which is defined as strength and power that individuals have within themselves) and would be more inclined to stay in an abusive relationship (Orala, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996).

Childhood abuse. Gelles (1976) study on why women who are abused choose to stay in the relationship found that the more abuse the individual is subjected to as a child, the more violence they are likely to tolerate as an adult. A child being taught that abuse is acceptable is likely to grow up with that belief so, when placed in an abusive situation, they are less likely to identify that it is abusive and rather choose to stay. There is also a

possibility that she will see the abuse as normal because of the abusive behaviours she was subjected to as a child, which will make it more difficult for her to identify the abuse and less likely for her to leave (Gelles, 1976).

The investment model. The updated investment model proposed by Rusbult (1998) is a combination of satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and commitment level. It can be used in both healthy and abusive relationships. The goal of the investment model is to determine how likely an individual is to stay in his/her relationship.

Satisfaction. The satisfaction level of a relationship is the degree to which the individual favorably evaluates the relationship (Rusbult & Marz, 1995). Often, abusive partners are especially charming and loving the majority of the time, so the small amount of abuse does not seem as bad. The frequency of the abuse and the balance of the positives contribute to the satisfaction level of the relationship (Hebert, Silver & Ellard, 1991; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). The less severe and frequent the abuse, the more likely a woman is to stay in an abusive relationship (Gelles, 1976). If the woman has a high satisfaction level from the relationship, she is more likely to stay (Rusbult & Marz, 1995).

Quality of alternatives. Quality of alternatives refers to the extent of which the individual's needs would be satisfied outside of the current relationship (Rusbult & Marz, 1995). Someone with high relationship satisfaction would likely have low quality of alternatives, whereas someone with low satisfaction level would have high quality alternatives allowing them to leave the relationship more readily. A woman with her own money, a job, and a support system would feel she has high quality of alternatives. Alternatively, a woman with fewer resources (i.e. no education, money, support system)

would have a low quality of alternative and would be more likely to stay in the abusive relationship (Gelles, 1976).

Commitment. The commitment level of the investment model refers to the degree of which the individual has invested in the relationship and the likelihood of them to maintain it (Rusbult & Marz, 1995). If the couple has been together for a long time, or have children together the commitment level is higher, which is a factor that makes it more difficult for the woman to leave. In the past this was especially true of married couples because the commitment to the relationship is much higher and there were more significant investments attached (Gelles, 1976) however, nowadays the divorce rates are significantly higher than they were in the 70s. The higher the commitment level to the relationship, the less likely an abused woman is to leave the relationship (Rusbult & Marz, 1995).

Research Question

The majority of the studies regarding IPV have focused on individuals who were able to successfully leave abusive relationships and the process involved with this (Scheffer Lindgren, & Renck, 2008). There have also been a few quantitative studies that looked at potential predictors of what causes women to stay in abusive relationships (Hebert et al., 1991; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). The purpose of this study is to get a qualitative understanding of why women stay in abusive relationships and also determine if there is anything that could help future victims leave the abusive relationship more easily. The research question that I based this study around is: “What are the experiences of women who stay in abusive relationships?”

Philosophical Framework

The main objective of this study was to gain an understanding for why women stay in abusive relationships and what allows them to eventually leave. For the purpose of this study a qualitative approach using an integrative form grounded theory was used. This helped me to better understand the individual experiences of women who stayed with an abusive partner. Analyzing the transcribed interviews gave me insight into key concepts that began to answer the research question. I believe that identifying key factors as to why women stay in abusive relationships can help to provide context for crisis workers and friends and family of individual of victims of IPV to help them to leave the relationship earlier on.

I analyzed my data using a feminist perspective. Feminist research focuses on gender domination within a patriarchal society and how that affects different problematic situations for women. The goal of this theory is to end the oppression of women within different aspects of life. In doing so, there is potential to correct the unequal social status between women and men in the world (Creswell, 2007). Utilizing the feminist approach in IPV is crucial because the majority of it occurs with women as the victims (Hines & Saudino, 2003). The feminist model views IPV to be the result of the oppression of women within a patriarchal system. Due to the ongoing belief that men and women are not equal in society, there is likelihood that men will believe that they have power over women. This assumption often leads to IPV where females are the victims of abuse perpetrated by males as a result of the belief of unequal power between them. The goal of feminist research is to bring IPV into the public eye and treat it as a societal problem rather than an individual problem (McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni, & Rice, 2007).

I have chosen to use the feminist theory that emphasizes male privilege and power within a patriarchal society as the root of IPV. I identify as a feminist, and I recognize that had an effect on how I analyzed my data. I do acknowledge there are situations where this approach does not work (e.g. reciprocal violence in relationships, or abuse from a woman to a man); however, for this study, I believe this was the most likely explanation. Utilizing the feminist theory has led to the beginning of acknowledgement of a societal problem, which can be introduced to society to attempt to decrease the prevalence within (McPhail et al., 2007).

Methodology

Qualitative Research Approach

Most studies have taken a quantitative approach to study women in abusive relationships (Creswell, 2007; Koepsell, Kernic & Holt, 2006). While quantitative measures such as questionnaires or surveys give a surface level explanation for why women stay in abusive relationships, I believe that a qualitative approach will help to reach new psychological depths and attempt to give a subjective feeling for the individual woman's experiences. I have chosen to use qualitative research because the topic of abuse is one that is more detailed and complex in its understanding. Qualitative research allows for a deep connection between the researcher and participant and allows the participant to speak out giving the study a more authentic feel (Creswell, 2007). This approach fits with the feminist viewpoint because it gives a voice to the individual woman and allows them to share a subjective feel of their experiences (McPhail et al., 2007). Grounded theory involves a back and forth comparative component, which was essential in identifying a key concept shared between victims.

Sampling

I chose participants by purposive sampling, which is defined by Creswell (2007) as selecting individuals that will purposefully inform the research question. This form of sampling was essential to this study as it is the only way to get a deeper understanding of the experiences of women who were actually in an abusive relationship. I was able to recruit four adult women who had stayed in an abusive relationship for at least a year and had now successfully left. The time in the relationship varied between participants with the shortest time being two years and the longest time being five years.

Recruitment. After I received approval from the University of Regina Ethics Board (Appendix A), I advertised my recruitment poster (Appendix B). I managed to acquire four participants the very first day the Facebook post went up. I also received emails from two other women who initially showed interest in the study however opted out of participating after the explanation of the study was provided to them.

Participants. I recruited a total of four participants between the ages of 19 and 40 with a mean age of 26.5 years. All participants had experienced some form of abuse (physical, sexual, or psychological) within an intimate relationship. The length of the relationship varied between participants with the shortest being 2 years and the longest being 5 years with a mean of 3.5. The length of time out of the relationship was between 1.5 and 13 years with a mean of 4.6.

Figure 1: Participant Data

Participant	Age	Gender	Length of Relationship (Years)	Years Out of Relationship (Years)	Marriage or children
P1	26	F	4.5	1.5	No
P2	21	F	2	3	No
P3	40	F	5	13	Both

P4	19	F	2.5	1	No
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Interviews

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. Before I began recording the interview, I explained the purpose of my study, let the participant read over the consent form (Appendix C), and then went over it a second time with them. When reviewing the consent form (Appendix C) with them, I insured that their participation was voluntary and that the interviews would remain completely confidential with the exception information obtained by a court order, or disclosing information that one was going to harm themselves or others. I informed each participant what the interview would consist of and that each interview would be transcribed verbatim. I offered all participants to look at the interview guide (Appendix D) but none of them took me up on it. Following each interview I made notes in the next interview guide of themes and questions that came up in other interviews and made a note of any thoughts or feelings that arose during the interviews.

The interview lengths varied from 18 minutes to 35 minutes. Each of the interviews were digitally recorded with an iPhone 6 with the permission of the participants after they signed the consent form (Appendix C). None of the participants seemed to experience any distress during the interviews, and I was actually surprised at how comfortable they seemed to be talking about their experiences. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored on a password protected MacBook Air to which only my supervisor and myself had access to.

My first interview was the shortest time, which was likely because I had not, figured out main themes yet and mostly just stuck with the original interview questions I

had formed. Even though this interview was the shortest, I feel that this participant had a lot to share and actually helped me to form more questions to ask the rest of the participants. By the time I did the second interview, I began to see overlap in many areas regarding why women stay and what helped them to leave, and theories relating to those answers began to form. I used the knowledge gained from the first two interviews to ask probing questions that supported the themes on display in the first two interviews. The last interview was the longest because I had finally gained the insight to ask the questions that would allow for overlap between participants.

Analysis

In order to analyze my data, I utilized grounded theory. Grounded theory is a form of methodology that involves the construction of a theory through the analysis of data. In my study, the grounded quality stems from the subjective nature of the individual interviews. Once all of the interviews were transcribed, I began analysis with coding techniques as recommended in Creswell (2007). There are three levels of coding within Grounded Theory: open coding, selective coding, and axial coding. The ultimate goal of Grounded Theory is to use the interviews as a baseline and discover a theory for why women stay in abusive relationships.

After transcription of the first interview, I met with my supervisor to come up with a list of open codes (Appendix E). Open codes were a couple of words that captured the meaning of line segments (Creswell, 2007). An integrative approach was used throughout the coding process, which allowed me to go back and forth between interviews adding new relevant codes when necessary. Coding was done in a line-by-line matter, which allowed me to break apart sections and see new themes emerge that may

have been missed (Creswell, 2007). The open codes were placed in the left hand margin of each transcribed interview to make it easier for the next level of coding, axial coding. I transcribed the next three interviews while looking for new themes that may have emerged throughout them. In total I found eight open codes with sub codes (Appendix D).

Using the open codes the next step is to generate axial codes. Each open code was cut up around the quotations and placed in a document titled with the code it represented. These separate categories were reviewed independently of each other to identify key elements or themes (e.g. participants commonly identified being uneducated as a reason for staying in the relationship). Similar categories were blended together and subcategories were formed when they emerged from the data (Creswell, 2007).

The final coding technique employed as a result of Grounded Theory was selective coding. The visual representation formed in axial coding was used to make connections about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). I have created a web (Figure 2) that shows the themes of why women stay in abusive relationships and based off of that created a model (Figure 3) similar to Rusbult's (1998) investment model to help to visually present the written model.

Results

The web that emerged answer the question of why women stay in abusive relationships helps to graphically show the complexity within that question and the relationships between different aspects of it. The core category that emerged was the feeling of being stuck in some way or another. Most women felt that they stayed in the relationship as a result of a combination of different aspects. The aspects, shown in the

web (Figure 2) include mind games, low quality of alternatives, high commitment level, lack of education, feeling of embarrassment, the belief that the woman can fix him, personality type, high satisfaction level, being blinded by love, and the feeling of denial. All of these themes tie into the central theme of feeling stuck but also tended to correlate with each other to some extent. From these themes I created a model (Figure 3) that is similar to Rusbult's (1998) Investment Model which, describes a person's likelihood of leaving a relationship to be the result of three central themes including low commitment level, high quality of alternatives and low satisfaction level. The Acknowledgement of Abuse Model (Figure 3) changes commitment level to some form of education or therapy and changes the goal of the model to be aware of the three aspects (education or therapy, heightened quality of alternatives, and low satisfaction level). It is my belief that with the awareness of the three aspects of The Acknowledgement of Abuse Model (Figure 3) in no particular order, a woman will reach her breaking point and have the ability to leave the relationship.

Access to Education or Therapy

The first part of the Acknowledgement of Abuse Model (Figure 2) is that the individual has some sort of access to education or therapy that allows them to acknowledge the red flags in the relationship. They do not necessarily have to outright say that they are in an abusive relationship but it is important that there is some form of understanding that the relationship is not fully healthy. Most of the women felt that the reasoning for the lack of acknowledgement was a result of being blinded by love.

Blinded by love. Being blinded by love is a common response to any relationship when it is initially starting out. It is often referred to as "the honeymoon stage" because

both partners are on their best behaviors and excited by the newness of the relationship.

Most of the women reported these relationships to be their first real relationships. As P2

states:

P2: Blinded by kind of the newness um like it was the first like serious boyfriend I had had and when I started dating him. I just, well I was like end of sixteen just turned seventeen, uh and you know that's pretty young and so I think I just accepted a lot of the uh behaviors or whatever

The blindness often carried on through to the rest of the relationship in the form of

blocking out bad days with the good ones. P3 states:

P3: You're blinded by love and you're blinded by you know the days that are good

Denial. It was very common for women to be in denial about the level of abuse even when they knew in the back of their mind, their relationship exhibited signs of it. P4

states:

P4: I remember thinking like shit this is an abusive relationship but I didn't want to tell myself that. I was kind of being like "no I don't want to be in abusive relationship so I'm not".

Lack of education. Most women felt that after moving past the initial blindness and denial stages they started to open up to the idea of acknowledging red flags. This was usually a result of some form of therapy or education. P4 felt that her lack of education played a huge role in her staying in the relationship for as long as she did. P4 states:

P4: I thought it would be more extreme than what I was in, like I thought it would, cause you kind of like hear things on TV and like read things about how people, like it gets escalated into like physical abuse but there was no physical abuse so I just assumed that like, "oh no abuse in this relationship"

Other women attributed a lot of their ability to leave on their individual access to therapy.

P3 shares:

P3: I think it was during therapy I have what I want to call an epiphany and she was a therapist who, it was like talk centered therapy so she basically like I came up with my own ideas of what was going on and I remember saying something to her about like I just don't know if she asked me what my biggest fear was and I said I just don't know if I will ever be able to leave or not be dealing with him harassing me and I said I don't know what I can do to stop and she said well have you ever thought about filing a restraining order and I said well no I don't think I could ever come to that and she said well do you want to deal with this for the next five years and so then I pictured my next five years of my life and I truly did not want to deal with that anymore and I was like, I'm going to do whatever it takes to get out

In both cases some form of awareness of the red flags or signs of abuse had to be made before the woman was able to leave the relationship. Education or therapy can also help to improve aspects of the victim's personality for them to realize that they are not at fault for the abuse. For example, a common theme among participants was the likelihood to self-blame. P2 states:

P2: I'm a pretty like empathetic person you know and so a lot of the time like yeah I was like what am I doing wrong okay well what am I doing that's like harming our relationship

Another feeling that therapy or education had a role in changing was embarrassment. P3 was fearful for what her peers would think and she felt that she would be judged if she left the relationship because there was a marriage and kids involved. She states:

P3: It was embarrassment, it was the fact that I was being abused before we were married but yet I still married him so I didn't want to disappoint my friends and family

Another common theme through out was the belief that the men could be fixed. Most of the participants believed that the abuser's had the ability to change and the women were going to be the one's who made them do it. P3 states:

P3: It's embarrassing really because women and I mean I know things are changing now but that many years ago like in the late 1990s we thought we could fix everything so I was going to be the girlfriend and then the wife that fixed this man ... We want to be the strong ones. We don't want our marriages to fall apart. Um we don't want to be that person down the street where "oh did you hear like [name] and [name] are fighting, like fighting again" and I didn't want to be that person

Mind games. Another common aspect of abusive relationships is mind games. The abuser will treat the victim horribly until she works up the courage to leave and then the abuser goes out of their way to be nice. This often leads the woman to stay in the relationship longer due to confusion about how she actually feels in the relationship. P2 states:

P2: I honestly, it was a year and a half in and I tried to break up with him and then all of a sudden the rest of the time it was basically I'm just kind of stuck. He'd have like kind of like a remorse you know what I mean um moment and then apologize and then we'd like move on kind of thing ... It would just be his reassurance on some level the "no like things are going to be okay, like you know we love each other like look how close we are" um you know like just saying sweet like there was you know sweet like meaningless words essentially

Another form of mind games occurred where control over the victim was the main goal.

P3 shares:

P3: You're caught up in the controlling aspect of it right like I think being in an abusive relationship is almost like being caught in like a time warp type thing right because you're being told like yeah you're wrong all the time and this is your fault, I'm doing this because you're wrong

Quality of Alternatives

The second aspect of the Acknowledgement of Abuse Model (Figure 3) includes quality of alternatives. As mentioned in Rusbult's (1998) investment model, quality of alternatives refers to the extent an individual's needs would be satisfied outside of the current relationship. For example, if they had a good support system, a job, or an education, they have higher quality of alternatives and would be more likely to leave the

relationship. It is important for women to recognize that they have good alternatives to the relationship to allow them to leave.

Low quality of alternatives. Individuals with low quality of alternatives are more likely to stay in abusive relationships because of the belief that the relationship they are in is all that they have in life. There is often a fear of being alone. P2 states:

P2: That fear of just like well what if like if I'm alone, is it gonna be better you know what I mean? Like is loneliness better than this? ...[He] was like my number one person. Like a lot of my really close girlfriends, like I just wasn't close with anymore or almost at all

Another common theme regarding low quality of alternatives involving worrying that you do not have the support of family and friends to help you through things when the relationship does end. P1 explains:

P1: At first I didn't have the support of my Dad which was kinda a negative for me moving forward and pushing him out of my life and the reason that he says I didn't have his support or I felt that I didn't have his support was because he was, he's good friends with the family and he didn't want it to be a negative thing and they wanted it to be as if we can break up and still be friends and still um there would be no animosity

High quality of alternatives. High quality of alternatives can often be an advantage to someone being able to leave a relationship due to the belief that once the relationship ends they have somewhere to go, and people that will be there for them. One of the most important aspects of to allow someone to leave a relationship is having a good support system. P4 states:

P4: I would say I had good quality of alternatives, again good friends, good family um like yeah everything that I kind of needed. And I think that's what happened was like after awhile I realized that

Satisfaction Level

The third and final aspect of the Acknowledgment of Abuse Model (Figure 3) is satisfaction level. Satisfaction level is how happy the individual is in the relationship. In abusive relationships it is common for the satisfaction level to fluctuate on a day-to-day basis. P1 states:

P1: So there was good times, like absolutely like I enjoyed being around him and he made me feel good sometimes but a lot of the reason why I stayed was he would constantly tell me like you cannot leave me, I can't be without you, I can't live without you and when I would try to leave he would let me leave but then immediately after he would come swooping in and say like I can't live without you, I don't know what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna change and I'll do everything right.

The satisfaction level often changes so quickly with abusive relationships due to the manipulative psychological abuse component. In these cases the women often tended to hyper focus on the good days and let that outweigh the especially bad days. P3 explains:

P3: There was maybe one good day amongst the three bad days but that good day was always a good day.

However, looking back on the relationship for most women, it is so clear that their satisfaction level of the relationship was actually extremely low. P3 continues:

P3: I wasn't happy when I look back now and I think the way I looked and the way I turned to food and the way um I acted around my friends and family. I was miserable.

Breaking Point

For all four women, the breaking point to leave the relationship came as some form of acknowledgement of all three aspects of The Acknowledgment of Abuse Model (Figure 3). Although most of them agreed that they had to reach their breaking point on their own, they all acknowledged the three aspects at some point before they were able to reach their breaking point and leave the relationship. P1 explains how she hit her

breaking point but there was a healing process involved with getting herself back to where she was before the relationship:

P1: I hit my breaking point and it took me seven years to find myself again and get myself grounded and you know be back to the person that I was prior to the abuse

The decision to leave an abusive relationship can also come as a shock rather than a carefully planned decision. P4 states:

P4: Something like triggered in my mind, and then I was single

The ability to leave an abusive relationship is not something that happens overnight and as demonstrated is a process that takes time and general self-awareness and often the women is only able to actually leave the relationship once she reaches that decision herself.

Figure 2: Web for Why Women Stay

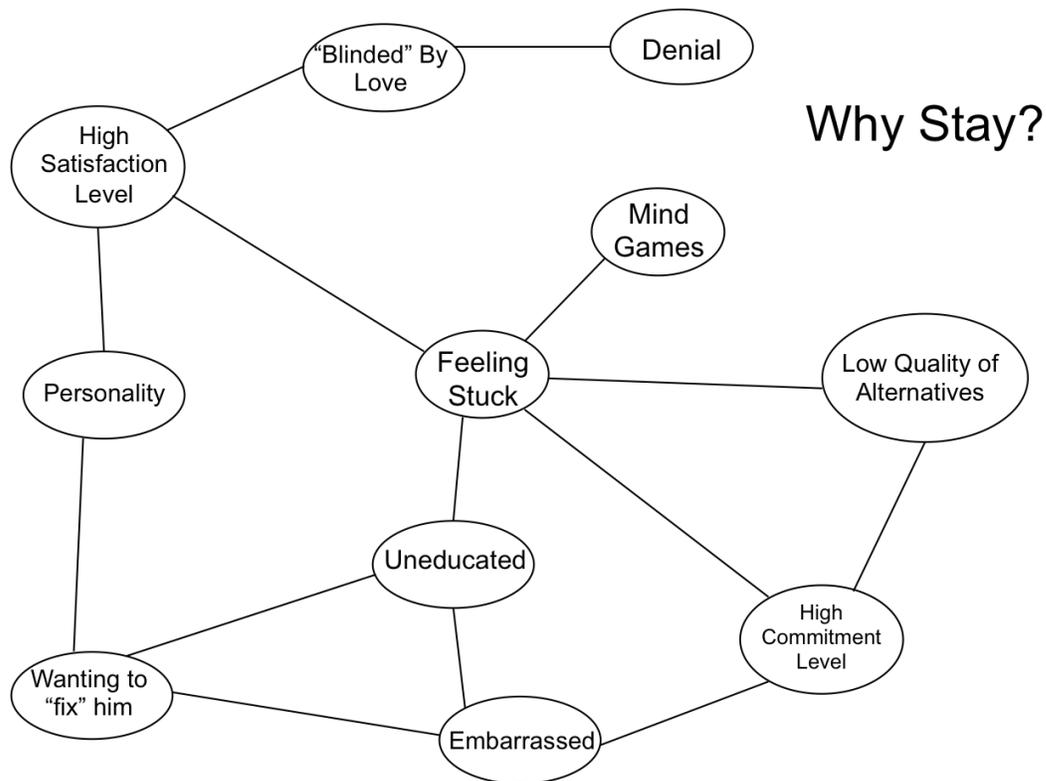
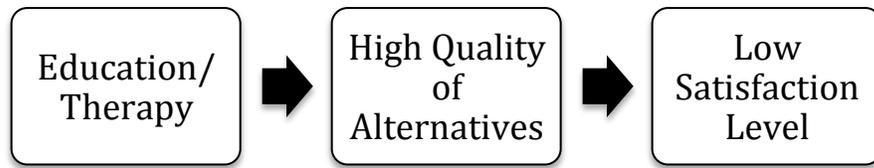


Figure 3: Acknowledgment of Abuse Model



Discussion

The Acknowledgment of Abuse Model is very similar to Rusbult's (1998) Investment Model. The only difference is that instead of the commitment level being a part of the model, it is now education or therapy with a main focus on acknowledging red flags in the relationship. I switched this from the previous model because out of the four participants I had they all had varying commitment levels, from two years dating to five years married, and they all had similar answers to the questions. This led me to believe that commitment level, although it plays a role in whether or not a woman leaves an abusive relationship, it is not as important as previously assumed by Rusbult (1998). With my research, it seemed more important for the individual woman to acknowledge that they were being abused before they were able to leave the relationship. A huge component of not being able to leave an abusive relationship is the feeling of being stuck. The Acknowledgment of Abuse Model is a woman's first step in realizing they are in an abusive relationship so they can start to take the steps to successfully leave it.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that only four participants were recruited and interviewed due to time restrictions and difficulty finding individuals that are willing

to disclose their experiences in abusive relationships. Because there were only four participants, it is not likely that theoretical saturation (which is the stage in qualitative research that no new data appears and the concepts are well-developed) has been reached, however qualitative research is more concerned with developing a deeper understanding of a concept rather than a vast scope of the topic (Boddy, 2016). Since there is overlap with Rusbult's (1998) investment model, there is some merit to the findings of this study.

Another limitation of the study is that because it includes stories from individual women, the results may not transfer to all women in the same situation. It is possible that these results only transfer to a western, Caucasian, middle class population but victims of IPV could share some of the baseline characteristics. It is also possible that women who have reached the ability to share their experiences in an abusive relationship, differ from those who do not feel comfortable disclosing.

Implications

This study filled a gap in the current research in that it gave a qualitative explanation for women who stay in abusive relationships and what individually helped them to leave. There have been previous studies that quantitatively look at why women leave abusive relationships but none of them start out with the original question as to why they stayed. By understanding why individual women stayed with their partner it could provide assistance to help future victims to leave earlier on.

Another implication for this study is for future research in this field. By encouraging women to talk about their experiences with abuse it could begin to allow women to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. This could have a massive effect on our society and potentially cause fewer women to suffer in silence.

Self Reflection

Throughout the process of this research I kept personal notes based on my experiences, and feelings that came up within the interviews. Something that came up immediately was how amazing this experience is and how grateful I am to have had the experience of hearing individual women's survival stories. I originally figured it would be more difficult to hear about all the pain and suffering each woman went through, however, when the interviews began I realized that would not be the case. Each of the women I had the opportunity to interview are so strong and their ability to freely talk about their experiences with abuse floored me. Every single one of them has been able to find peace with themselves, and partake in self-love. They had all moved on from the negativity and at least began the healing process from their abusive past.

This was my first research project using Grounded Theory. At first the concepts seemed foreign to me and it took me awhile to understand what to do. It was overwhelming to see how long it took to transcribe an interview, and how extensive the coding process is, however once themes began to form I started to get a grasp on it. I was getting ready for bed when the core concept of feeling stuck jumped out at me. I ran to get my coding supplies and ended up scribbling out the entire web for why women stay (Figure 2) and The Acknowledgment of Abuse Model (Figure 3) in less than five minutes. The five minutes of arranging the models as they appeared in my head was the most exciting part of this entire project.

Anticipated Relevance

As of right now, there are not very many qualitative studies that look at the reasoning for why women end up staying in an abusive relationship. Most of the studies

only focus on why women chose to leave abusive relationships and the healing process afterwards. The majority of the research that does exist on why women stay has been quantitative. Qualitative studies allow for a more authentic understanding of individuals' experiences and a deeper understanding of the topic. The nature of the semi-structured interviews combined with the subjective and uncensored responses from participants have attempted to provide a deeper, more detailed, understanding of the experiences of women who stay in abusive relationships. My study will attempt to fill the gap in the literature and provide a starting point for further research to build on.

Future Research

There is so much potential for future research in this area. It would be interesting for researchers to continue to start research beginning with the question of why women stay in abusive relationships and then progressing to the formation of a theory. Understanding why they stay in abusive relationships is a loaded question that plays a huge role in their ability to leave the relationship. I also believe it is important to continue with more qualitative research in this area branching out to different populations because there is so little qualitative research out there and I believe it provides a deeper explanation to answer research questions.

It would also be interesting for future research to explore the difference between women who are willing to disclose about their experiences with abuse and those who are not. There is potential for a difference in likelihood of leaving a relationship the process behind it that could be interesting to explore. I found it interesting that only one of the women sought out counseling as a solution. I believe that disclosing to others about your

experiences can play a huge role in the acknowledgement of abuse and even get women to leave relationships earlier.

Conclusion

This study addressed the reasoning behind why women stay in abusive relationships and what helps them to leave. By understanding this reasoning, there is potential to help victims of IPV leave the relationship. The prevalence of IPV is extremely high; it is important to identify warning signs and get the victims out of their relationships to avoid permanent damage (Straus, 2004). I believe that a better understanding of why women stayed in abusive relationships will allow for the formation of more advantageous solutions to remove victims from relationships plagued with IPV. This study provides a great starting point for why women stay in abusive relationships and what allows them to leave them earlier on.

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Appendix A



*Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Amy Hamilton

DEPARTMENT
Psychology

REB#
2017-009

SUPERVISOR:
Dr. Mary Hampton

TITLE
Understanding the Experiences of Women who Stay in Abusive Relationships

APPROVED ON:
February 17, 2017

RENEWAL DATE:
February 17, 2018

APPROVAL OF:
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review
Recruitment Poster
Consent Form
Interview Guide

Full Board Meeting

Delegated Review

The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <http://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/forms1/ethics-forms.html>.

Dr. Katherine Robinson
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:

Research Office
University of Regina
Research and Innovation Centre 109
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4775 Fax: (306) 585-4893
research.ethics@uregina.ca

Appendix B

**Department of Psychology
University of Regina**

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of women students at the University of Regina over the age of 18 who have successfully left an abusive relationship.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in an open-ended interview about the experiences of staying in an abusive relationship. All interviews will be confidential.

Your participation would involve 1 interview session,
which is approximately 60 minutes in length.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:

Ashley Hamilton
Psychology Honours
Advisor: Dr. Mary Hampton
at
306-530-8040

Email: hamilash@uregina.ca

**This study has been approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics
Committee.**

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Title: Understanding the Experiences of Women Who Stay in Abusive Relationships

Researcher: Ashley Hamilton, Undergraduate Student, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, hamilash@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Mary Hampton, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Regina. Phone: 306-585-4826, mary.hampton@uregina.ca

Introduction: The objectives of the proposed study are to document the experiences of those women who had stayed in an abusive relationship before finally leaving. Documenting the experiences women who stay may assist crisis workers, in better assisting abused partners to leave, and victims to gain the courage to leave abusive relationships.

Procedure: We are asking you to participate in an open-ended interview based on a series of specific questions asking you to describe your experience staying in an abusive romantic relationship. The interview will be one hour or less in length, and will be audio taped and transcribed. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Risks and Benefits: There is a possibility that discussing your experiences with intimate partner violence may create undue harm and distress. If you experience any discomfort during the interview, you can ask to stop immediately without any repercussion, and will be referred to Dr. Mary Hampton, a registered clinical psychologist, at 306-585-4826 for support. There is also a small possibility that others may become aware of your participation in this study. This risk will be minimized by implementing procedures to remove all identifying information (e.g. names) from the transcripts, and final written product, and through the use of encrypted software.

Research Personnel: This project is being conducted by Ashley Hamilton and Dr. Mary Hampton of the University of Regina. If you have any questions about the project, please feel free to contact the researchers at hamilash@uregina.ca, 306-550-1310.

Confidentiality: Any information derived from your participation in this project will be kept confidential by the researchers except in the future event of a court order, disclosure of illegal activity, or disclosing intent to harm yourself or others. The audio tapes and transcribed written records will be stored securely, will be available only to the researchers, and will be destroyed in a little more than five years. Data from the interviews will only be used for the purposes of this project, and names and other identifying information will be omitted or disguised in any presentations or publications of the analysis of the data. All communications by email will be kept confidential, will be accessed only by the researchers for the purpose of this study, and will be deleted upon completion of the study. There are minimal risks involved in contacting this secure and confidential email address.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this project is completely voluntary. You can decline participation or withdraw from the study with no negative consequences until March 15, 2017. After this date, it is possible that some results have been analyzed, written up, and/or presented and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. You have the right to answer only those

questions that you feel comfortable in answering. Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your access to services or how you will be treated.

Follow up: To obtain a transcript of your interview or a copy of the completed study please indicate below or contact the researcher at hamilash@uregina.ca. If the transcript or completed study are sent via Dropbox at the participant's request the participant should be aware that the data on Dropbox is stored within the US and thus falls under the US Patriot Act.

Ethics Approval: This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or by e-mail at research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Consent Statement

Having read the above, I agree to voluntarily participate in this project. The procedure and goals of the project have been explained to me and I understand them. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this project until March 15, 2017. I also understand that, although data from this study may be presented and published, my identity will be kept confidential. Finally, I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

(signature of participant)

(signature of researcher)

(date)

I have received a copy of the consent form: ____ yes ____ no

Would you like to see a copy of the transcript of your interview? Yes No

Would you like to see a copy of the completed study? Yes No

Appendix D

Interview Guide

(Describe the project and the interview process; review interview guide with participant)

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Length of relationship:

Length of time out of relationship:

Received counselling/treatment? : _____ Yes _____ No

Were there ever charges filed? :

Purpose: I am interested in understanding the experiences of those who have stayed in an abusive heterosexual relationship.

1. Can you give a definition of what abuse means for you (and give examples)?
2. Were there any signs that you were in an abusive relationship and were you aware of them?
3. What was it that got you to leave the relationship?
4. Is there anything I haven't talked about that you would like to or any questions that you have?

Appendix E

Open Coding Categories

A –Abuse (Physical –PH, Sexual –S, Psychological –PSY)

T –Therapy/Treatment

SA/A –Signs of Abuse/Awareness

STAY –Why they stayed

LEAVE –Why they left

POST –Encounters After

LT EFFECT –Effects long term

Advice –Any advice they had for current victims of IPV

Sub codes within STAY and LEAVE

SS –Support System

E –Education

H/L C –High/Low Commitment

H/L SL –High/Low Satisfaction Level

H/L Q of A –High/Low Quality of Alternatives