

Women's Dialogues about Abuse:
Implications for Domestic Violence Programs

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Saris", is written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This study examines domestic violence through focus group interviews with women residing in domestic violence shelters in Indiana. The issues explored include, but are not limited to, barriers to receiving help, women's experiences within abusive relationships, and residential program strengths and weaknesses. Three types of fear, (1) fear of the abuser, (2) fear of the unknown, and (3) fear of being alone, are found to be determining factors for the women staying in the abusive relationship as well as making the decision to leave. The women's advice to other women in abusive relationships and their suggestions for improving services provided by residential programs are provided.

Women's Dialogues about Abuse: Implications for Domestic Violence Programs

In the past decade, domestic violence, particularly spouse abuse, has been brought increasingly to the public's attention. What was once considered an unspoken family issue, condoned by society, is now deemed a significant social problem (Dobash & Dobash, 1971; Shir, 1999; Stacey & Shupe, 1983). A review of the literature will give an overview of the current views of women's experience of domestic violence and will discuss the role of battered women's shelters in addressing the problem.

Rates of Domestic Violence

An indication of the extent of the problem of domestic violence is the number of individuals affected by it. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has estimated that in the United States, between 4 and 6 million women per year are victims of domestic violence. Many experts cite incident rates as high as 60% (Shir, 1999; Walker, 1979). And even conservative estimates, derived from studies with allegedly representative national samples, indicate that almost 30% of married women in the United States experience some physical abuse at some point in their marriage (Shir, 1999; Straus, 1978). Additionally, physical abuse is present in 20 to 35% of dating relationships according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (1998). Furthermore, a national self-report survey of violence in North American homes found that within the past year a spouse has

committed an act of violence against his or her partner in one household out of four (Abel, 2000).

Women are overwhelmingly the victims of domestic violence. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has found that approximately 95 to 98% of victims of battering are women. Their study also found that up to one third of America's homeless population are women and children fleeing abuse. According to the Subcommittee on Children, Families, Drugs and Alcohol of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources (1999) domestic violence also shows up in hospitals where it is reported that wife beatings result in more injuries requiring medical attention than rape, auto accidents and muggings combined. Although leaving the situation is an option, a study done by the United States Department of Justice (1998) found that women who leave their batterers are at a 75% greater risk of being killed by their batterers than those who stay. The Department of Justice reports that 30% of all female murder victims are killed by their husbands or boyfriends, with beating constituting the most prevalent method of wife murder (Fields, 1978; Shir, 1999).

Effects of Domestic Violence

Given these findings it is obvious that domestic violence exacts a high physical, psychological and social price. The health of abused women suffers significantly when power and control tactics dominate their daily living. In addition to physical injuries and permanent physical damage, abused women frequently experience anxiety, fatigue, dependency, sleeping and eating

disorders, chronic pain, and other problems that result from living with constant stress (Butler, 1995). Stark and Flitcraft (1988) report that abused women attempt suicide much more frequently than do women who are not abused. Some reports suggest that one in four suicide attempts among women takes place in the context of a violent relationship (Department of Justice, 1998).

Dynamics of power and control underlie domestic violence. Abusers often control the victim's access to friends, family, financial or material resources and mobility (Parker, 1993). Controlling behavior in an abusive relationship is designed to create an imbalance of power between the partners. Physical battering is just one type of coercive control exerted in unhealthy abusive relationships. Women suffering domestic violence are frequently subjected to sexual abuse as well as emotional degradation and psychological intimidation (Butler, 1995). Psychological abuse that is frequently used to undermine feelings and self-esteem include ridicule, criticism, withholding support or approval, interrupting, ignoring or shaming (Better Way, 1998; Romero, 1985). Victims of psychological abuse suffer from isolation from others and low self-esteem (Butler, 1995; Romero, 1985).

Domestic violence affects not only the married couple but also the children and family unit (Shir, 1999). The Department of Justice reports that every 7.4 seconds a woman is beaten by her husband and 87% of these incidents are witnessed by children. Witnessing abuse affects children, causing emotional problems and increased anger and fears (Better Way, 1998; Shir, 1999). It has also

been found that children in domestic violence situations are at greater risk for abuse. The 1990 Uniform Crime Report stated that 70% of men who abused their wives also commit child abuse. Furthermore, viewing abuse or being abused as a child influences repetition of abusive behavior later in life (Shir, 1999). When violence occurs in the family, children are observing models for how to deal with conflict in relationships and disagreements. The intergenerational cycle theory of violence (i.e., that children who are recipients of violence will grow up to be perpetrators of violence) has been validated repeatedly (Gil, 1970; Maurer, 1976; Shir, 1999; Welsh, 1976). It is evident that domestic violence affects not only the victimized woman, but also the entire family.

Causes of Domestic Violence

Abusive men do not recognize their abnormal use of power and control. Violent men greatly underreport and minimize their violence (Better Way, 1998). Most do not think of themselves as batterers. Domestic violence is often triggered by the anger aroused by the threat of losing their partner and excessive feelings of dependency making separation an extremely dangerous period. Minor events can erupt into major confrontation as the abuser experiences a loss of control (Better Way, 1998; Walker, 1979). Domestic violence is an exercise in power and control. Victims of violence typically have less power than their abuser. The abuser interprets his own lack of control and distress as resulting from his partner's behavior and reacts with manipulative use of threats, psychological abuse and physical abuse to reestablish control. This process leads to the cycle of

Why do they Stay?

Why women tolerate domestic violence has been a topic of much research. It has been found that for many women harsh and demeaning words hard hits and slaps are a normal part of life. Some women tolerate domestic violence because they have grown up watching men batter women and they think it is normal. Many women see their mothers, aunts or other female relatives withstand domestic violence so they think its natural (Vanzant, 1997). Clara Kirk, founder of a Chicago shelter for women and children, reports that many women are embarrassed and ashamed to tell others about their abuse or to seek help (as cited in Vanzant, 1997). Women who are victims often keep their pain to themselves not willing to risk the shame and embarrassment (Vanzant, 1997). Some women are ashamed to admit that their partner abused them, that they stayed in the relationship (Better Way, 1998; Vanzant, 1997). Additionally, some even believe that the abuse is their fault (Better Way, 1998; Vanzant, 1997).

Margaret Cole, executive director of Women's Resource and Rape Assistance Program in Jackson, TN, has found that some women stay because they believe that their abuser is going to change (as cited in Vanzant, 1997). When he is not battering everything is okay and the victims want to go back to that situation (Vanzant, 1997). Similarly Phyllis Baker (1997) found that love for their partner played a role in battered women's choices to stay with or go back to abusive partners. Children were also a big factor in the women's decision to stay in abusive situations. Many women abandon the idea of what they really want

to do, which is get away from the abuser, in order to do what they think is best for the children (Baker, 1997). Vanzant (1997) also found that women will stay in abusive situations because they want a two parent home for their child.

Besides those making a conscious decision to stay many women are coerced into staying. Repeated exposure to emotional abuse erodes self-esteem and self-confidence, making it difficult for the women to leave their abusers (Butler, 1995). Controlling behavior in abusive relationships frequently involves financial exploitation, with the abused women allowed little or no access to funds (Butler, 1995). Economics is one of the reasons many women tolerate domestic violence. Many battered women are financially dependent on their abusers. Many battered women do not have job skills necessary to earn a sufficient income to support themselves and their families (Better Way, 1998; Butler, 1995; Vanzant, 1997). A lot of women have not been allowed to get a job and cannot afford to leave or move out (Cole, 1997, as cited in Vanzant, 1997).

In addition to controlling finances, abusive partners may exercise power by controlling where the abused women go and whom they include in their circle of friends. This social abuse isolates battered women from actual and potential support systems that might help the victim (Butler, 1995). In a study by Romero (1985) comparisons were made between strategies used on prisoners of war and battered wives. Similarities found between captors and batterers included isolation from the victim's support system. When the victim remained isolated, both captors and batterers were successful in destroying the

individual's self-identity, as well as eliciting and controlling certain kinds of behavior.

Fear is another big reason women stay in abusive situations. Most battered women are realistically afraid that their children, families, friends or selves will be harmed by the abuser if they try to leave. Nearly all batterers threaten to kill or harm the victim and/or others in the victim's life (Better Way, 1998; Romero, 1885; Walker, 1979). These threats must be taken seriously. A study done by the United States Department of Justice (1998) found that the abuse escalated in 75% of the cases when the woman tried to leave the batterer. Many batterers also threaten to kill themselves or may even fake minor attempts to do so in effort to manipulate their victim (Better Way, 1998; Walker, 1979). Other common kinds of fear include fear of the unknown, fear of being alone and fear of not being believed (Better Way, 1998; Vanzant, 1997).

Domestic Violence Programs

Battered women's shelters and the organizations operating them are the major lifeline for abused women and their children. In 1980, there were approximately 300 shelters for battered women throughout the United States (Roberts, 1981). Within 15 years, that number has increased to more than 1,200 (Davis & Hagen, 1994; Donnelly, Cook, & Wilson, 1999). At first glance this proliferation of shelters seems to indicate substantial progress in meeting the needs of battered women. Increasingly, however, researchers have identified limitations in the shelter movement and have noted that these organizations

actually serve only a small proportion of battered women worldwide (Gondolf, 1988; Loseke, 1992).

Battered women's agencies first appeared in the United States in the 1970's. In the early years of the battered women's movement, services tended to be widely scattered geographically and limited in scope (Schechter, 1982). As public awareness of domestic violence spread the number of shelters and services grew. Today the more than 1,200 state-funded agencies for battered women offer temporary shelter, and some combination of emergency hotlines, counseling and support groups, financial assistance, transportation, job and housing locator services, legal assistance, and children's programs (Davis & Hagen, 1994).

There have been limited studies evaluating the effectiveness of residential domestic violence programs. One of the largest studies was conducted by the National Family Violence Program (1984) that studied fourteen family violence programs nationwide. By using self-report surveys given to the administrators of the programs, the study found ten direct services provided by family violence programs. Although each project does not offer every service the service detected include shelter, childcare, information and referral, hotline, advocacy, counseling, crisis intervention, legal assistance, transportation and mediation/arbitration. The programs were then ranked according to how many services they provided. The problem with this type of qualitative evaluation is that it only identifies services and not any information on effectiveness of these

services. Adding points for number of services provided is a very limited way to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of programs. A better way to assess these programs is to talk directly to the people receiving the services.

The Present Study

Most evaluation studies to date have not used focus groups as the means of data collection to examine women's experiences with residential domestic violence programs. Focus groups are used little in psychology, despite their methodological advantages. As Wilkinson (1999) notes, "Focus groups are relatively naturalistic and so avoid the charge of artificiality; they offer social contexts for meaning-making and so avoid the charge of decontextualization; and they shift the balance of power away from the researcher toward the research participants and so avoid the charge of exploitation" (p. 221). By using the focus group method we will be hearing first hand from the women who use these services about their experiences of domestic violence, how shelters are or are not meeting their needs, and how such services might be improved. Giving the women who are served by these programs a voice will enhance the quality of information we receive and may allow for new discoveries not easily found through the use of more traditional survey measures.

Method

We contacted directors of residential domestic violence programs in central Indiana informing them of our study and requesting participation. Five programs accepted and two were chosen because of location and limitations on

funding. The directors of these two programs approached women and solicited participants to take part in a study of residential domestic violence programs. A focus group was arranged and conducted, one at each program, with five women using their services at that time participating in each group. Each of the two groups was held at the shelters one evening during the week.

Two European American middle class women were the facilitators of the focus groups. The groups lasted approximately two hours each and were audio taped. After a brief introduction of the facilitator and of the study, the women were told to choose pseudo names to insure confidentiality. These names were used throughout the study. The members of the group were given two copies of a consent form that was then read out loud by one of the facilitators. The women then gave one copy of the consent form back to the facilitators as a sign of their consent in place of a signature because of the sensitivity of this material. The participants were then given a brief survey of demographic questions to fill out. The women were also given a copy of the focus group questions that would be covered during the discussion so they could think about their responses ahead of time and make notes on the sheet. Once all the participants completed filling out the survey we briefly covered some ground rules for the discussion, such as confidentiality, not identifying their abuser, and not getting into excessive depth about details of the abuse. The women were then asked to respond to questions related to four major topics: a) what brought them to the program, b) how easy or difficult was it to get assistance, c) how they benefited from the program and

d) where they saw themselves in five years. Participants were also encouraged to initiate conversations on topics that were important to them and relevant to the discussion.

The women participating in the two groups varied in demographic characteristics, amount of time with program, and previous use of similar programs.

Focus Group 1 – A Better Way:

All of the participants at this location were European American. The five participants ranged in age from 24 to 67 with the average age being 39.6. Two of the women were single, two were married and one had a live in partner. All of the women in this group had children. They ranged in number from 1 to 5 with the average being 2.8. The participants had spent from 2 weeks to 7 years with A Better Way with the majority having used their services for about 2-3 months. Four of the women had never used the program before and one woman had used the program over one year ago. The participants found out about the program from either professional referrals or from a friend or family member. Only one of the women had ever used a similar program. She used it approximately three months prior to coming to A Better Way.

Focus Group 2 – Alternatives Inc.:

Three participants in this group were European American, one was African American and one was South African. The age range in this group was from 18 to 50 with the average age being 28. Three of the women were single and

the other two were married. Most of the participants did not have any children but the two that did had two children each. All of the participants had spent less than two weeks with the program, ranging from four days to just under two weeks. Only two of the women had used this program before, both over six months prior. The majority of the participants heard about the program from professional referrals although one heard from a friend or family member and another heard from a stranger at a restaurant. All but one of the women had used similar programs in the past ranging from two to five years prior to coming to Alternatives.

The two focus groups were similar in terms of their marital status and in the ways they found out about the program. The two most common ways were from friends or family members or through professional referrals. The groups differed, however, with respect to age, number of children, and length of time in the program. As a group the women in the Alternatives group were a bit younger than women in the Better Way group. Only two of the women in the Alternatives group had children while all of the women at A Better Way had at least one. On average, the women at Alternatives had not been with the program as long as the women at A Better Way had, a difference of weeks versus months. However, on the average, women in the Alternatives group had used more similar programs than did the women in the Better Way group.

Focus Group Discussion

Focus groups are designed to give the participants a voice on the issue being discussed. During our dialogues many issues were raised that were important to the women. In this section I will discuss core areas that were discussed during the focus group interviews and will point out consistent themes that emerged through the women's dialogues.

Abusive Situations

Not all domestic violence situations are the same. There is much variety in type of abuse, severity of abuse and even the victim's relationship to the abuser.

Group #1: All of the abusers of the women in this group were husbands of the participants. All of the women reported at least being hit by her husband and the severity only increased from there. Madonna reported, "He hit me, broke my glasses, I ended up with a black and blue eye." Lori said, "I was put in [the shelter] after being in intensive care for seventeen days and being hospitalized for two months and nearly losin' my life and had all my teeth kicked out." Mary had a similarly abusive husband who would get physically violent and would threaten her if she ever left him. She explains, "He's threatened my kids and threatened me and everything else, he was going to kill us. At one time he even threatened to burn my boy's house down."

Group #2: The women's relationship to their abuser varied in this group. Only three of the women in this group were abused by their husbands. Of the remaining two, one was abused by her brother and the other was abused by her

foster parents. Although the relationship to the abuser varied among women in this group, the patterns of abuse remained the same and the stories were all too familiar. The women repeatedly reported being hit, kicked and punched. Two of the women reported being sexually abused as well as physically abused. Scarlet confessed, "Well, he made me feel obligated and it was my responsibility to do certain things [sexually] that I did not want to do." Diana expressed how extreme her abuse was when she said, "I was in a real abusive relationship with him, he'd pull guns on me, kick me down the stairs when I was pregnant and just numerous things."

It is important to note that when we speak of domestic violence it is not limited to spouse abuse. Any type of relationship has the possibility to become violent. We must keep in mind that although the great majority of battered women are being abused by their husbands or boyfriends there are other abusers. But no matter who the abuser is the pattern of violence remains the same. It begins with random episodes of violence and escalates to more frequent beatings. The women know the pattern all too well as illustrated by the following dialogue.

Madonna: "Who's to say maybe two to three weeks from now he might not do it again? There's like uh, what they call like a honeymoon phase and each time that the abuser comes back everything's all hunky dory, sweetsie and all flowers and hugs and kisses and candy and all this other stuff and then afterwards that kinda

gets shorter and shorter till there is no honeymoon stage, just keeps goin' into the abuse."

Mary: "Gets rougher and rougher."

Madonna: "Oh yes, and gets uglier and uglier."

Mary: "Yeah."

Madonna: "And the abuse gets worse."

Barriers to Receiving Help

Making the decision. The biggest deterrent keeping women from getting out of their abusive situations is realizing they need help and having the courage to leave the relationship.

Group #1: The women of this group reported a variety of reasons that kept them from seeking help. The majority agreed that the biggest step was having to realize for themselves that it was time to leave. The women noted that they had to get to a certain point in their life to make that realization. Madonna said, "I had to get to that point no matter what everybody told me to divorce him it didn't matter till I got to that point myself when I was ready." This viewpoint was shared by all of the women in the group. Autumn remarked, "When everybody tells ya and you still believe him you think everybody's against ya." The women explained that until one was ready to see this situation for what it was they lived with blinders on. Autumn explained, "I guess you'd call it a film over your eyes. That before you marry him all those things that you notice afterwards are there you just don't see it." Madonna agreed, "Blinders."

leaving isn't far behind. She says there finally comes a point where you would rather die trying to get away than take the abuse any more. She said, "I had planned on running away but it was like next week, next week and that day I just decided I can't live like this anymore. I'd rather die now trying to get away or I'm gonna make it. It was difficult to make that initial move, I was terrified." Elizabeth comments, "Saying to get out is easy to say but getting out is not always easy to do." Diana agrees that telling women to get out is easy to say but it is still up to that woman to realize for herself that it is time to leave. She explains that there is a fear of dying that one has to overcome to be able to take the chance of leaving. However, the women recognize that women are taking a chance by staying as well. Thus, they must face the decision with courage.

Diana: "It's easier said than done to numerous people. You can't just say 'walk out.' You can tell anyone that a million [times], I was told that a million and one times, its just that fear but, they just have to overcome that fear, really they just have to leave and take the chance of dyin' or die here. I'd rather take the chance of getting killed by leaving than to stay. At least you went out a hero."

Scarlet: "At least you didn't die a slave."

Diana: "You died tryin', you know."

Both groups were very similar in their reasoning behind what kept them from getting help although the discussion with the women in group #2 was much more intense as they brought a more of life or death urgency to getting out into the dialogue. This could partially be attributed to the fact that the women in

this group were much more closely removed from the abusive situation than the women in group one were. For the women in group 2, the seriousness of the situation was still fresh in their minds where it may have been less immediate for the women in group one. Even so, women in both groups mentioned that it was necessary for the woman to realize she needed help and that no amount of advice from others would persuade her until she was ready to make the change. The women in both groups also mentioned having to overcome some fear in order to come to the realization. For the women in group one it was more of a fear of the unknown or of being alone while the women in group two feared dying or consequences of being caught trying to leave. The women in both groups stressed how difficult it was to leave the abusive situation but in hindsight know it was the only thing to do.

The Role of Children. Having children can influence when or if the women leaves the abusive relationship.

Group #1: All of the women in this group had children and most agreed that the children were a deciding factor as to when they left the relationship. Once the abuse started effecting the children, they knew it was time to leave. Renee's husband was a pedophile and although he had not done anything to her daughter she believed she could be at risk and wanted to get her away from him. For Autumn it took the birth of her second son to make her realize it wasn't worth staying. She explains, "Well, he was doin' it for a long time, did it while I was pregnant with my second son and up until he was four months old and

everybody at work was tellin' me, and it was like I got to the point where I just knew I couldn't go home. Where for the last couple months they'd tell me 'ya know we'll do anything we can, we'll help you, you don't deserve this' and I just kept goin' home. I'd talk to them about it all day and I'd go home to it at night. It got to the point where it started to effect the children." Autumn said that was when she knew there was no choice but to leave. She later added, "I stayed in it the whole time he did it to me, did it the whole time I was pregnant till my second son was four months old and when I saw it was startin' to effect my older child, that's when I left, but when it wasn't effecting him I just put up with it."

Group #2: Only two of the women in this group had children but they agreed that having children makes it harder to leave. They felt a sense of obligation to their children to have their fathers around even if it meant taking beatings themselves. Diana explains, "Its harder when you have kids cause it was easy for me to say, well I'll stay here because with my first I was only seventeen and I thought well I can either leave and not be beat anymore and have my daughter and raise her alone or I can just stay and deal with it so she can have a father." As much as they don't want to take the children away from their fathers, battered mothers are also torn between protecting their children from the truth or letting their children see their fathers for who they really are. Diana said, "Well I could be a real horrible mom and tell her her dad was an asshole and beat the shit out of me, ya know. But what's that do? They just put you in a situation, that's not something I want to ever have to tell my daughter but I don't

want to lie to her either. I mean, I want to let her know he wasn't a good person he was a bad person, a bad, bad person." Ange had similar feelings, "He caused problem in front of my kids and I didn't want them to see what I was going through so I left." Ange did not want her children to have to witness what their father was capable of and so removed herself from the situation. Still she saw this choice as problematic in the fact that although it was the father that was causing the violence the children will remember that it was their mother that left.

For all of the women with children the dynamics of the abusive relationship are even more complex. These women must factor in the feelings and needs of their children as well as their own. Many of these women are willing to put up with beatings longer and be seen as the "bad parent" in order to save face of the father to his children. This is unfair and unsafe. These women are caught in a double bind which makes it difficult to make a smooth exit.

Sacrifices. In order for battered women to effectively leave their situations they often must make sacrifices and leave behind people or possessions to insure their safety.

Group #1: The women mentioned a variety of things that had to be given up when they decided to leave their relationship. These included not only physical possessions but also things such as family, jobs and freedom. Mary said, "I kinda wish they'd lock him back up 'cause I've got a car down there and everything else that I can't get till he's locked up or somethin'." For the majority of women for whom the shelter was in the same town as their abuser they felt a loss of

freedom as they were scared to go out for fear that he may see them. Lori admits, "It took me about three weeks and then I wouldn't go very far, ya know, not very far at all because that was, my ex-husband was crazy and still today I still know what to expect if I ever run into him so I never venture too far." For many they had to limit contact with friends and family members in order to keep the confidentiality of the shelter. No matter what the situation sacrifices had to be made in order to insure a clean, safe break.

Group #2: The women in this group discussed many similar sacrifices that had to be made. The majority of the women in this group came from out of town (if not out of state) to this shelter so in their cases they not only left behind possessions, they left behind everything and everyone they knew. And, as in Scarlet's case, many flee with only the clothes they are wearing and little else. She said, "I fled from my extremely abusive husband. I was in Oklahoma with him. I fled with the clothes on my back, my purse and a few other little items and that was it." For Elizabeth whose abuser was her brother, she had to sacrifice a romantic relationship with another man in order to remove herself from the abuse. She explains, "I had a relationship with a guy, I couldn't stay with my mom just to stay with him ya know, I had to get completely out of town and that means getting away from him too. So I'm kinda going through two withdrawals at one time because I have to give him up in order to be safe." These women had to leave almost everything behind, from homes and material things to children and relationships to get away from their abusive situations. Or as Elizabeth put it,

"Because it's like a ship that's sinking and there is nothing I can do to save the ship so I might as well save myself."

As illustrated by the women's quotes, battered women are sacrificing a lot in order to insure their safety. Many of these women are not able to make contact with loved ones for fear that their abuser may track them down. They had to leave behind valuable possessions and keepsakes that they don't know if they will ever see again. Many are confined to the shelter so as not to be recognized out in the community that they had previously lived in. So in a way leaving the abuse is almost a punishment in itself.

Services Desired and Those Provided

Services Desired. All of the women came to the shelter with a preset list of benefits and services they were hoping to receive at the shelters.

Group #1: Although this topic wasn't mentioned specifically in this group, throughout the conversation the women eluded to some benefits they were hoping to find at this shelter. These included safety and protection from their abusers, a place to heal and recover, and legal assistance.

Group #2: The women in this group gave numerous examples of benefits they were hoping to gain by coming to this type of shelter. They ranged from simply a place to stay to a place that would offer safety and protection, legal and counseling services, a place that would help them start over and get back on their feet, and a place that would have contacts with agencies to help them.

The following dialogue illustrates the wide range of needs of the women.

Facilitator: "How did you think you'd benefit from this program when you came here? What were you looking for?"

Barney: "Mine was to learn how to live on my own cause I have no idea how to."

Ange: "Mine was to save money, get a job, save money and try and find me a place to live."

Diana: "Mines pretty much the same, save money and get back on my feet."

Elizabeth: "Contact other agencies."

Scarlet and Diana: "Yeah."

Diana: "Referrals, to have time to think, yeah."

Scarlet: "Mine was legal, counseling and to have somewhere safe and unknown to him to live at."

Diana: "Exactly."

Even before they got into the shelter these women knew that they needed help and even what type of help they were going to need. Being in their situations they cannot shop around for shelters to find one that suits their needs so it is important that all shelters have basic contact and referral services to provide these women with the help they need.

Services Provided. Even though the women came into the shelters with an idea of the services they were looking for, once they got there they found other services that were useful to them.

Group #1: The women in this group had been with the program long enough to realize the extent of services the shelter provided. In addition to the

aforementioned legal and counseling services, women at this shelter report having been introduced to victim assistance programs. They also mentioned the networking between programs and how it is useful if you need to leave your city to be safe but still need a shelter. Madonna explains, "They got places like this all over the United States and they transfer [the woman] if their life is threatened that bad where they're from they transfer them to another state to get away."

Overall the women seemed pretty satisfied with the services they received through the program. Renee commented, "They're real good, I'll tell you they have everything covered here. They have all the resources to give us and they're pretty organized." Mary said, "Yeah, they help you with everything you want help with."

Group #2: Even though the women in this group came in with a lot of expectations they commented more than once that they got more than they expected. Elizabeth said, "I think I got more than I even actually expected when I walked in. Like I said, I just thought I would get some referrals or something like that and that would be the end of it but I got more than that." Diana agreed, "I just kinda thought a place to stay, a bed to sleep in, a warm meal and that's it." But she goes on to explain that she received a wide variety of useful services. The women told how the shelter was willing to provide almost anything they needed from a toothbrush to transportation and discussed how appreciative they were. Scarlet: "Like they'll give you bus fare ,or..."

Barney: "They'll give you, like some people who don't have clothes, they give you these little salvation army clips and you can go there and get like two outfits, so I mean,...."

Elizabeth: "They're very supportive."

The women from both shelters seemed pleasantly surprised with the wide range of services that these programs were willing and able to provide. And not only at first with providing basic necessities, such as toothbrushes and clothing, but all the way through to counseling and legal assistance to helping them find a job and a place to live. The programs provided a comprehensive variety of services and the women wanted to express their gratitude for that.

Support from within. One of the greatest resources these shelters provide is one that they do not even have control over. It is the support the women receive just from being able to share their experiences with other women who have been in similar situations.

Group #1: Although this topic was not specifically discussed in this group it was obvious from observing the interactions of the women that they were very supportive of each other. For example, the women often nodded in agreement when someone was sharing their experience and they often said supportive things to each other.

Group #2: These women were very vocal about the support they receive from each other and how beneficial it is, as is illustrated in the following dialogue.

Elizabeth: "Talking to other people that have been through some of the same stuff you've been through, where else can you get that?"

Diana: "Yeah, I agree with her. Once you get here and start talkin' to people, I mean, you can just sit and talk and laugh about it kinda like, it's not funny but,...."

Scarlet: "We make jokes, it's not funny what happened to us. It's just a release."

Diana: "You can laugh about it."

Scarlet: "We make nicknames for people."

Ange: "We're just a positive group who are gettin' on..."

Besides being able to vent together, the seriousness and similarities between situations creates a bond between them that the women liken to family.

Elizabeth: "...but once you get past that it's like you've been friends for a long time"

Diana: "Its like a big family, is what it is."

Elizabeth: "Yeah."

Scarlet: "Yeah."

Elizabeth: "And it's the family you don't have somewhere else, like the family you left, the family that didn't understand."

Scarlet: "Yes."

Elizabeth: "So I've got sisters here that I didn't have in Ohio. And even after we leave here we may not remember each other's names and we may not talk to

each other but we'll remember about each other and how we helped each other and stuff like that."

(The women nod in agreement.)

The support these women receive from other women using the program is noteworthy at very least and as can be seen through these two dialogues, irreplaceable. At no other place can women find others who understand their situations so well. It is a therapy that no counselor can match.

Psychological Issues and Psychological Growth

Control issues. Women who have been victims of domestic violence often times have control over their lives taken away from them by their abuser. Once they leave the abusive relationship regaining that control becomes a big issue.

Group #1: The women in this group reinforced the idea that women in abusive relationships experience a loss of control over their own lives. The women expressed that it is the abuser who makes all the decisions from whether or not they work outside the home to what they can wear. Lori explains, "A lot of women when they come in they're not used to ever taken care of themselves. They're used to havin' somebody else, like the abuser makin' all the decisions and doing everything. Some women has never even worked cause that's the choice that he made." She continues, "I didn't have much say so at all ya know, as far as a job or grocery shopin' or anything, it was never ever left up to me. He was in control of everything down to what time the lights went out." "And if the

realizing that they were finally in control of their own lives. Scarlet said it best, "Well, I'm in control of my life again for the first time in two years and its sometimes overwhelming 'cause I can now make my own decisions. It might be hard for people to understand how that feels if you've never been in that situation but its good because who doesn't want, who wants someone else to be in control of them? No one, no one really has the right to either." Many of the women agreed that having so much control back all at once was intimidating but something the shelter was helping them with.

Although only one participant vocalized a desire to "regain control" many of the women spoke of getting their lives back in order or getting back on their feet. No matter what words they used to express it, many of the women had the desire to get control of their lives back. All of the women repeatedly stressed the fact that control was a large issue in their abusive relationship and in some cases still continues to be.

Making choices. It is important for a program working with women who have been in abusive situations where they have had all control taken away to help the women start making their own choices again.

Group #1: The women have realized that the shelter is there to help them make choices but not to make choices for them. Lori expressed this well, "They lead us in the right directions and they tell us what choices we have. Whether we accept it or not and what choices we can make, whether its go back to our abuser or its stay in a shelter and proceed with a divorce, as in my situation, that's what I

chose to do. But they never tell us what to do and I've never know of them tellin' anyone what to do but they definitely tell you what choices you have and tell you what help you can receive and then help you lead in the right direction. But you have to do it yourself 'cause that's how we learn we can take care of ourselves as well as our kids." Many of the women agreed that the program was helpful in identifying choices they could make but it was up to the women to make the decisions.

Group #2: The women in this group expressed similar feelings that the program was there to help them see what choices were available to them and then left it to the women to make the choice. Diana explained, "They show us our options, what we can do at this place and time, and tell us they will support us whatever we decide but then leave the decision to us." The women in this group also noted that it was stressed to them that the choices they are making today are going to effect them later in life. The program has the women identify goals and helps them identify choices that will help them reach those goals. Elizabeth said, "They gave us paper to fill out where we could fill out goals for the first year, for the third year, for five years from now. When I first got here I didn't care about that, I just wanted a place for now, but they gave us stuff like that to get us thinkin' about the future and decisions you're making today are gonna help you get to where you wanna be ten years from now." The women are now realizing that they can make their own choices and that those choices are what is going to determine the rest of their lives.

Women from both groups seemed intimidated by the fact that they were in sole control of making choices for their lives. They were reassured by the fact that the programs were willing to help them identify their options and make some sense of it all. The programs seem to be doing a good job at making sure the women make their own decisions and in so doing are helping them regain control of their lives.

Goals. Women coming out of abusive relationships need to have goals for themselves to help them transition to their new lives.

Group #1: Although most of the women when asked about their goal listed long term goals such as graduating from nursing school, many focused on more immediate goals such as finding a place to live and getting their divorce finalized. Autumn summed up her goals by saying, " At this point I just wanna be able to get to where I can work enough to where I don't ever have to feel like I need someone else to do it for me ever again." All of the women said that they needed to focus on healing themselves first and getting to a place where they feel ready to move on.

Group #2: Women in this group had no problem vocalizing the goals they had set for themselves. The staff at the shelter had the women identify their goals many times. Many of the women identified some type of schooling, everything from getting a GED to getting into medical school. They also mentioned careers they would like to have such as cosmetologist and a writer. They expressed the feeling that the program encouraged them in their goals and empowered them in

the process. Diana showed how the program has helped her when she said, "Now I have all these goals that I wanna accomplish now. And before, three weeks ago when I came in, if you'd asked I would've told you I didn't care about anything and now there's too much in life I want for myself to let any man bring me down. I'm a smart individual and I can do anything I want to do." It is obvious the shelter is having a positive effect on these women's self images and are helping them realize they can achieve their goals.

The women expressed a variety of goals, both short term and long term. Many expressed a desire to radically change their lives while many just wanted their lives back. In either case the women expressed that the shelters were a driving force in both identifying their goals and helping the women reach them.

Suggestions to Battered Women and the People that Serve Them

Safety issues. Since many women leaving abusive relationships are literally running for their lives it is vital that shelters not only make the women feel safe but actually be safe.

Group #1: All the women in this program expressed the feeling that they felt safe in the shelter. They mentioned a variety of safety features such as cameras and buzzers that were used to secure the actual building and just knowing they were there made the women feel better. Lori explained that when she first came she was scared because she didn't know how the program worked and what security they had to protect her, "but after I seen how the program worked and what the shelter was all about, ya know, but I probably wouldn't have felt no more safer

now here cause I knew that I was safe here, ya know, 'cause its very well secured and the staff as well as the volunteers make sure they do the best they can to make sure each individual is safe." Many of the women shared that they felt safe as long as they were inside of the shelter but as the following dialogue illustrates, when they went outside of the shelter they didn't feel protected and were afraid of being seen.

Autumn: "I feel safe as long as I was near here but if I went out into the town I didn't feel safe because I wasn't far from here and like, he could come here. He could be drivin' around town and see me."

Mary: "Well that's the way it is with me, I feel safe in here, yeah, but when you get out you don't know whether ya gonna run into him or not."

Madonna: "Or somebody who might know him and get word back."

As noted the women felt unsafe beyond the walls of the shelter. However, overall the women of this group were fairly happy with the level of safety the shelter was providing.

Group #2: Although no woman in this group came out and said that they completely did not feel safe in the shelter, the overall feeling was one of uneasiness. Many comments were made to the issue of the shelter not being secretive enough. This is an important issue to women like Scarlet who are trying to hide from their abuser. She said, "In other words, if you're a stranger and just come into town if you ask around you probably will eventually maybe find someone who knows where this place is, that kinda worries me a bit." Elizabeth

don't think there's enough advertising." The women said that they believed it was too hard to find out about the program. They commented that if the shelter was better known as a place for women to go, more women would be getting out of their abusive relationships.

Group #2: One weakness that the women pointed out about this shelter was a lack of privacy. Elizabeth particularly made the point that it was hard to find a place to be alone and do the serious thinking that you need to do. The suggestion was made that there could be a room put aside just for adults and just for the purpose of having a quiet place to go to think or fill out paperwork or to just be alone. Another suggestion made was the addition of activities for adults. Scarlet suggested, "Well I think maybe as well if they could do more activities for adults maybe in the evening or educational courses, the reason I'm saying this is because I'm thinking about the other shelter I was at and they had, on like Tuesdays and Thursdays, some kind of like mandatory educational classes they would hold to do with domestic violence and things like that. They had a girl that came in and did aerobics and yoga with you. They had things going on. Maybe they had more funds I don't know what the situation is but it would be nice if they could do something like that."

It is interesting that the women in the second group focused on privacy as a weakness, both in the confidentiality of location as well as privacy within the house. On the other hand the only weakness the first group could identify was too much confidentiality, they wanted more women to know about the program.

An interesting side note to this is that a woman in the Anderson shelter was actually from Muncie and made the comment that she had to go to Anderson to find a shelter like this because they didn't have one like it in Muncie. This just proves the women's point that there is a definite lack of knowledge about the shelter in the community and something needs to be done about it.

Advice to Other Women. As an ending piece we asked the women what advice they would give someone who was in a situation similar to theirs. This is what they said.

Group #1:

Madonna: "Get help now before its too late."

Lori: "I'd probably say get out, get out while you can and don't wait till it's already too late."

Madonna: "Yeah, get out."

Autumn: "Save yourself."

Mary: "Yeah, they better get out while they can cause they could get killed."

Rene: "That's true."

Madonna: "And it only takes one time, could be the last."

Group #2:

Ange: "If he's hitting you he does not love you, he does not care for you and we all know a baby doesn't keep a man so get your head on and come in here and get yourself together."

Barney: "Believe your kids if they say they're getting' molested. That's all I have to say."

Scarlet: "I'd say get out as soon as you can. After that first punch get the hell out. Because it doesn't matter how many times he says he's sorry it doesn't stop him from doing it again no matter what he says, no matter what emotional guilt he uses don't believe it, just get out. That's what I would say and don't be scared 'cause there are other people who have done it and got out and if they can, you can too."

Scarlet: "If someone tells you get out, listen, think about it 'casue it's not always easy for you to see it because of all this emotional stuff they put on you it drags you down. So I would say do whatever it takes and get out, even if its just running like I did. Ya know, don't take it no matter what they tell you don't take it."

Conclusion

The data we collected from our focus group study proved to elicit many of the same themes that current literature on the topic has consistently found. Many of the themes tend to revolve around what factors keep a woman in an abusive relationship. Consistent with previous research, the women in our focus groups repeatedly gave examples of staying with their abuser for the sake of their children (Able, 2000; Baker, 1997), and wanting a two parent home for their child (Vanzant, 1997.) In addition to current findings, women in our group also noted that children were also a determining factor for making the decision to leave the

abusive situation. For example, when the abuse started to effect Autumn's and Renee's children they knew it was time to leave. The women in our groups also gave love for the abuser (Baker, 1997) as a reason keeping them in the abusive relationship. Madonna specifically at one point made the comment that she could not leave her abuser because she was still in love with him. She had to get over being in love before she could make the decision to leave. Fear has also been found to be a strong influence in keeping women in abusive situations (Kirk, 1995; Better Way, 1998; Butler, 1995). The women in our group vocalized three reasons causing them fear that kept them in the abusive situation. The first was a fear of their abuser. The women were afraid he would find out about them wanting to leave and they would be hurt worse or even killed. The second was a fear of the unknown. Many of the women were timid to leave simply because they did not know where to go or what it was going to be like. The third type of fear mentioned was a fear of being alone. Many of the women agreed that even though the abuser was not someone they wanted to be with he was still better than being alone and that is why they stayed.

It has repeatedly been reported that dynamics of power and control underlie all situations of domestic violence (Able, 2000; Better Way, 1998; Butler, 1995; Parker, 1993). Consistent with this research the women in our groups time and again made comments addressing control issues. The women are well aware that their abuser was controlling them and gave examples of extreme control such as making them keep the bathroom door open. The women in our groups

were also aware of the cycle of violence (Better Way, 1998; Walker, 1979), and even made reference to parts of it by name. Lori said it best, " 'Cause it will definitely make you weaker each time you get into one makes you just a little bit weaker. Ya know at some point in time, it's awful to say, but it could be too late. But it's definitely a cycle and ya just have to push yourself not to jump outta one and into another. It's a cycle of violence and I'm gonna get out of it." It is unclear if the women had been able to detect the cycle themselves by living it or if it has been taught to them by the staff at the shelters. In either case the women are aware of the cycle of violence and can now recognize the warning signals of abusive situations.

As has been noted in current research, violence during pregnancy generates a special concern in abuse situations (Butler, 1995; Parker, 1993). Women in our groups reported the incidence of physical battering during their pregnancies (Butler, 1995), as well as sustaining the first episode of battering during pregnancy or on arrival of the couple's first child (Butler, 1995; Campbell, Poland, Ager, & Waller, 1992). Examples expressed in our discussions include Autumn who noted that her husband did not start abusing her till the birth of their first child. Diana also gave the examples of her abuser kicking her and pushing her down the stairs while she was pregnant.

Finally, the women in our groups were adamant about expressing abuse as being not only physical but also emotional. Consistent with literature, women mentioned psychological abuse being as destructive as physical abuse (Able,

woman made the comment that she had to go to Anderson to find a shelter when there was one in her own town, she just did not know about it. As Lori pointed out, lack of knowledge is a factor that keeps many women in their abusive situations. The women strongly suggested more advertising in places that battered women are likely to be, such as grocery stores, bus stations, and hospitals.

Increased community awareness does not and can not mean decreased confidentiality. The issue that causes these women the most concern is their safety. They repeatedly stressed the importance of confidentiality and security of the shelter. For the shelters whose location was not as confidential safety issues were much more prevalent in the conversation and the women were more concerned with their abusers finding them. The women suggested more security measures should be employed such as security cameras and door intercoms.

In conclusion, we remind the reader that this study is based on a small sample of women being served in Indiana and their experiences cannot be generalized to all women residing in a shelter. However, this study took place in a location that is referred to as "Middletown America" (Lynd & Lynd, 1925). This area has been studied extensively as a representative community and is known to most sociologists as "Middletown America" due to the classic Middletown studies. It has also been used by companies such as Frito-Lay as a representative test sight for new products (Markley, 1998).

We believe that our study contributes to our understanding of battered women's experiences because of our choice of the focus group method. Psychological research in this area tends to rely primarily on quantitative approaches while overlooking the value of the qualitative methods that are frequently used in other disciplines (Wilkinson, 1999). We chose the focus group method as our means of investigation because it gave the women a voice in helping us to understand their experiences. The focus group method does not put limitations on topics to be covered in the dialogues leaving the direction of the conversation, its tone, and issues covered up to the participants of the groups. By relating to the researchers in a more natural conversational manner, as opposed to being surveyed, the women are actively involved in introducing issues and so bringing to light topics that otherwise would not be covered. All of our suggestions come straight from the women themselves.

Ultimately, our study is based on descriptive research and, as such, is not intended to provide definitive information in this area. Rather, it is our intention to present the accounts of those who are served by domestic violence programs and begin to ask questions that stimulate further inquiry into the provision of services to battered women.

Our study has proven to be eye opening in getting a first hand look at women's experiences with domestic violence and with the shelters that are providing support for these women. But at the same time it is our opinion that shelters are designed merely to tend to the aftermath of the problem and are not

effective in preventing the abuse in the first place. Domestic violence is a serious problem involving not only the women who are battered but also the batterers themselves. Too often the focus is put on the victim of abuse and the abuser is pushed to the sidelines and not dealt with. Although the victim may escape one cycle of violence the perpetrator will go on to do it again to other women. In order to break this chain of events we must start at the source, the abusive men. We believe that an effort must be made effecting the batterer himself in order for any real change to be made.

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Appendix A

“Women’s Dialogues about Abuse: Implications for Domestic Violence Programs”

**CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH
YOU MUST BE AT LEAST 18 YEARS OF AGE TO PARTICIPATE**

The purpose of the research is to study the usefulness and effectiveness of residential domestic violence programs. If you take part in this study you will be asked to 1) fill out a short survey of personal background information and 2) participate in a group discussion with other women from this program concerning your feelings about this program. The discussion will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours to complete.

You will not write your real name on any of the forms and all data will remain completely anonymous with the use of pseudo names.

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. There is a possibility the some of the personal questions you are asked may make you feel uncomfortable. If you experience some anxiety as a result of the study, counseling services are available from the staff here at this program.

The benefits from participation include giving information that might suggest ways to improve services for other women.

The decision of whether to participate in the study is completely up to you. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the discussion at any time, for any reason, without penalty. You will receive \$20 compensation for your time.

For one’s rights as a research subject, the following persons may be contacted: Ms. Sandra Smith, Coordinator of Research Compliance, Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-1600, or Dr. Sharon Paulson, Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Department of Educational Psychology, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285 – 8500.

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Appendix B

Focus Group Survey

1. Age: _____
2. Marital Status: ___ Single ___ Married ___ Live-in partner
 ___ Casual relationship (dating but not living together)
3. Length of time in current or most recent relationship: _____ months/years (circle one)
4. Number of children: _____
5. Length of time with this program: _____ months/years
6. Have you used this program before? ___ Yes ___ No
 If Yes, how many times have you used this program? _____ times
 When was the last time you were here? (check one)
 ___ less than 3 months ago ___ between 6 months and 1 year ago
 ___ between 3 and 6 months ago ___ over 1 year ago
7. How did you find out about this program? (check all that apply)
 ___ poster/flier
 ___ newspaper
 ___ friend/family member
 ___ professional referral (check one): ___ doctor/hospital ___ police ___ counselor
 ___ other (please describe): _____
8. Have you used other services similar to this program? ___ Yes ___ No
 If Yes, what program was it? _____
 Where was it located? _____
 When was this? _____ months/years ago

Appendix C

Focus Group Discussion Questions

- I. Each person introduces herself and says briefly what brought her here.
- II. How easy or difficult was it for you to get assistance?
 1. How did you find out about this program?
 2. How easy was it for you to locate the shelter?
 3. Do you feel safe here?
- III. How did you think you would benefit from this program when you came here?
 1. Do you feel as though this program is making a significant, permanent change in your life?
 2. What are the strengths of this program?
 3. What are the weaknesses of this program?
 4. Are there any changes you would like to see in this program?
- IV. Where do you see yourself five years from now?
How will you get there?