TALKING BACK:

RURAL OHIO WOMEN’S REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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We must find time to stop and thank the people who make a difference in our lives.
- John F. Kennedy

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of scholars have expanded rural crime research since the 1990s, but the majority of their empirical and theoretical investigations have been mainly gender-blind. To add, research on the topic of the decision-making processes of rural women experiencing intimate partner violence, especially women who stay in abusive relationships for any length of time, is lacking in the field. This dissertation attempts to fill this gap through an examination of how women navigate their intimate violent relationships within the context of their social, cultural and historical realities. A secondary data analysis of qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with 43 rural Ohio women revealed the imperative to focus on women’s contextualized decision-making processes, specifically the decisions to stay, with a consideration of the social, economic, and criminal-legal obstacles they confront in the process. The supplementary data revealed by qualitative in-depth back-talk interviews with 12 rural Ohio women uncovered their individual and shared constructions of the meanings given to the violence they experienced and their stay-leave negotiations in the course of their abusive relationships. Naming and defining their abusive experiences allowed for the construction of themselves and others and their conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization factored tremendously into their stay-leave decision-making processes. The characteristics of abusive male partners and rural community attributes also factored into women’s stay-leave negotiations and still remain an important feature of rural life that changed little through place or time. Viewing women in context shows how work, age, motherhood, love and sexual jealousy exist as integral components of their individual and social locations that impacted their decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency. All women demonstrated that even when they stayed, they were actively making decisions and plans and employing a variety of survival strategies that demonstrated resilience and resistance. This dissertation contributes to the rural crime literature by showing how the social, cultural and historical context in which resistance takes place and how the construction and production of men’s identities and masculinities as they are negotiated in the face of socially and economically altered rural landscapes is of vital importance.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Imagine a place where neighbors stroll down the street at dusk each night – and actually take the time to stop and chat, where you can buy local produce the very morning it’s picked from the field, where volunteer fire departments still hold ice cream socials – and residents turn out in droves to support them. Welcome to a simpler, more enjoyable lifestyle that never left the Mid-Ohio Valley. Rush hour never quite developed here. Doors often go unlocked. Schools are still safe places for learning and fun. Trips to commune with nature are counted in minutes, if not by opening your back door. And front porches are still used for sitting and chatting with neighbors along tree-lined streets.¹

For visitors and outsiders (and for some local residents), these descriptions of rural Southeastern Ohio paint a lovely picture of life in the quiet countryside, amidst the rolling green hills and peaceful demeanor of a more simple time and place. Growing up in southeastern Ohio, I will be the first to admit that the notion of unlocked doors, safe schools, and friendly neighbors seem too good to be true, but they were a reality, for some. For most rural southeastern Ohio residents, this is the home they have known and loved and could not imagine living anywhere else. For others, this is still a reality they have yet to experience.

Audrey had experienced two long years of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse at the hands of her live-in partner but her life was forever changed on the night of May 11, 2011. She had left this relationship several times and after kicking him out again, she felt this time was going to be for good. Audrey, a middle school teacher, was having dinner with friends when she continued to receive phone calls and text messages from “James,” who relentlessly tried to get her to come and pick him up as he had “run outta gas.” Since she did not want him to come to the restaurant and cause a scene, as he was threatening to do, she decided to leave her friends and meet up with him “one last time” to get him the gas he needed to get home. She describes every detail of the next few

minutes of that night. She recalls how she pulled her car behind his at the pump and when he didn’t have the money to fill up his tank, she paid the cashier ten dollars and waited patiently in her car. In the meantime, a friend of hers from the restaurant pulled in and begged her to go home with her, fearing that he would be violent with her again. Audrey politely refused the offer as she knew her friend was living at home with her parents and that James would more than likely follow them to the house and cause a scene. She adamantly insisted that she just wanted to get him the gas he needed to make it home and then she was done, for good. The next few minutes would change Audrey’s life forever:

He is like, he looks at me and he says, ‘Are you ready for this?’ And I'm like, ‘ready for what?’ And he's like, ‘ready for me to blow your fuckin ass up?’ And I'm like, ‘what are you talking about?’ Like still at this point it's not, it's not sinking in. It's not sinking in that we are at a gas station and he has gasoline at his disposal or that he would even do that, right? So I'm sitting there. My hands are on my steering wheel and I'm ready to go. My car is in drive and I'm like, I'm just like ‘okay whatever.’ He takes the gas pump out of his, out of his gas tank sprays my car from my headlight to my taillight and my window’s down so gas comes all over me. Again my hands were up here and I was so stunned. There's gas in my car now and I'm like, ‘did that just happen?’ And I kind of looked at him and he reached into his pocket, grabbed a book of matches, lit a match and threw it. And my whole car is up in flames. I'm in flames…I look up and he's standing there and I'm like ‘help me, please help me!’ He comes over and says, ‘Audrey I'm sorry but I gotta go. I have to leave. Audrey I'm sorry but I have to leave.’ Next thing I know, I'm at Grady Hospital… It was crazy and that was the last time I saw him.

We are shocked and horrified that something like this can happen to a woman who has already taken the steps to leave her violent relationship. She did what she was “supposed” to do and that was leave. She had also done what she had learned to do for so long in the course of her abusive two-year relationship. She attempted to contain him, to pacify him, in an attempt to de-escalate his increasing hostile behavior. She didn’t want him to create a scene or worse, hurt her friends, so she obliged to his requests this one last time. After Audrey retold her story to me as a part of this research study, instead of asking her why she stayed or why she went back, I decided to ask her why she thought he sprayed her with gasoline, lit her on fire, and asked, “Are you ready for this?” Audrey tucks her hair behind her ear on the side of her face that still shows the scars of this night and replies:
I mean, I guess, and that’s what I was going to tell you too, like, if I would’ve argued with him that night, this probably would’ve never happened but the fact that I didn’t say anything and just let him go and go and go probably enraged him so much because he knew that I was done, that that’s the reason. That finality in his head, finally hit with him and he couldn’t stand it.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

What is the broader social, political, and economic context in which crime is operating in rural North America and other parts of the world? Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2008) have urged fellow critical criminologists, especially those conducting rural crime research, to continually ask this question and it is one that undergirds the current study. The first paragraph of this dissertation provides a version of life in rural Ohio that some are lucky to experience. The other side of rural life also demands critical attention and we need to keep in mind that rurality does not imply the sociological equivalent of immunity from inequality, injustice, and crime (Donnermeyer et al., 2006). Fifty-nine million (roughly 21%) of Americans live in rural areas, with 15.5% living in poverty (ARC, 2011). Rural women are, in fact, one of the poorest populations in the United States, generally having less economic, social, cultural, and political power than both urban residents and rural men (Pruitt, 2007). There are 29 southeast Ohio counties part of the region designated in 1965 by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) as part of Appalachia, comprising an estimated population of 1.45 million residents (ARC, 2011). The median income per household in Appalachian Ohio is $38,881 (ARC, 2011) and the per capita income for residents of this region is $29,630 (ARC, 2008). While the poverty rate for the state of Ohio was 14.3%, 16.7% of Appalachian Ohioans were deemed poor, which is twice that of the entire U.S (ODSA, 2013). For the Ohio counties that comprised the study site, the percentage of persons in poverty from 2007-2011 range from 16.3% to 31.5% (ODSA, 2013). Between 2005 and 2009, 39.6% of Appalachian Ohio residents live below 200% of poverty (ARC, 2011). In terms of employment in this area, the unemployment rate in Appalachian Ohio is 7.1% and 34.9% of nondisabled adult residents age 20-64 are not working (compared to 27.7% for the state as a whole), while 32.8% of resident workers travel outside their home county for work, including 8% to another state (ARC, 2011). It should also be noted that the unemployment rate is an underestimate as it does not take into account people who have dropped out of the labor
force and “discouraged workers” who have stopped looking for work (Alvi, 2000). Compared to 13.2% for Ohio as a whole, 17.9% of Appalachian Ohio residents 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or GED and only 13% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 23.6% for the state as a whole) (ARC, 2011).

Due to the increasing numbers of foreclosures in 2008, it is estimated that as many as 1.5 million Americans may lose their homes and those living in “auto-wreck states,” particularly in rural areas are especially at risk (Ivry, 2008). To add, there has been a massive decline in the number of family owned farms because many Americans are experiencing difficulty in extracting a decent living from them (DeKeseredy et al. 2007; Jacobs 2005). Furthermore, the “Wal-Marting” of the rural U.S. essentially results in the forced closing of locally owned small businesses (Stone 1997; Tunnell 2006) and many rural towns in Ohio, such as those highlighted in this study have been economically shattered by the closing of other major sources of income such as sawmills, coalmines, and construction/logging companies (Jensen 2006). For instance, in 2002, after nearly 70 years of operation, the Rocky Shoes and Boots factory closed in Nelsonville, Ohio (one of the towns from which women in the study lived), moved to Puerto Rico, and offered none of its 67 displaced workers replacement jobs (Price 2002).

This rural economic crisis has been said to increase involvement in rural drug trafficking, consumption and production (Donnermeyer and Tunnell 2007; Grant 2008; Tunnell 2004; Weisheit and Kernes 2003), but it also exacerbates the problem of intimate partner violence. In this ‘crisis of the rural gender order,’ rural men’s power has become fragile because of major challenges to their masculine identity generated by these rural social and economic transitions (Sherman, 2005). Some unemployed men, like those in Sherman’s (2005) study of families harmed by the closure of sawmills in a rural California community, became active, progressive fathers while their wives worked. Too many other unemployed rural men, like those referenced by women in the current study, however, deal with the aforementioned “masculinity challenges” by embracing rural patriarchal attitudes and beliefs and view violence against women as legitimate and effective means of repairing their “damaged patriarchal masculinity” (DeKeseredy et al., 2006; Grant, 2008; Messerschmidt 1993; Raphael 2001; Websdale, 1998).
When a man assaults another man, we ask: why did he do that? But when he assaults a woman we ask: why does she stay? Framing a question in this manner can be devastating to women who are experiencing violence in their intimate relationships, as it implies an individual-level defect instead of a systemic failure. Asking why women stay in or return to abusive relationships influences the way academicians, the public, social service agencies, and the criminal-legal systems attempt to answer this question. The ‘answers’ are not always conducive to supporting women facing multiple struggles in their lives. The multilayered and routinized forms of domination converging in women’s lives hinder their ability to create alternatives to abusive relationships (Crenshaw, 1991). This highlights the importance of viewing women’s decisions to stay as complex. By contextualizing the decision-making processes of women, it becomes clear that the violence that many experience is not only at the hands of their abusive male partners, but also by the very systems set up to protect them.

Women’s survival also depends on continued and creative use of whatever personal powers they possess, even if it was only the power to remain in the relationship (Lempert, 1997). In learning to survive within the context of staying, women exhibit great determination and immense will power in making plans to leave abusive relationships. Once the decision-making process becomes contextualized, the demonstrations of strength and resiliency of these survivors becomes apparent and their decisions to stay make sense. This process is one in which women make meaning of their relationships, actions, and decisions, thereby constructing themselves and others and their conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization factor into their stay-leave decision-making processes. It is imperative to view women in their social, cultural and historical contexts as their position in these particular individual and social locations, especially with regards to place (rurality) impact their decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency while surviving their violent intimate relationships.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The original Ohio study, from which this research project stems, was a qualitative study conducted ten years ago involving interviews with 43 women from rural Ohio areas.

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who had experienced sexual assault by former intimate partners when trying to end or who had ended their relationships with them. The purpose of the study was to explore these experiences and the link to male peer support for sexually aggressive men in rural Ohio. All the women who were interviewed in the original Ohio study had eventually left or were in the process of leaving their abusive partners at the time of the interviews; however, most women stayed and this ‘process’ of leave-taking lasted from a few weeks to ten years. Many women also went back to their abusive partners many times before the final termination of the relationship and many also described being in more than one abusive relationship. The original interview schedule did not specifically intend to include questions about these women’s experiences while staying in the relationship. In fact, the women’s inclusion in the study was based on the criteria that they were in the process or had already separated from their abusive partners. Nevertheless, many women discussed their experiences of staying and/or returning during their leave-taking process. Staying was so enmeshed in the process of leaving that it proved difficult to discuss them separately. Listening to these women continuously attempt to justify their decisions to stay highlights another important dimension (exercise of agency through different forms of resistance) that had yet to be explored in the original Ohio study; hence, supplementary analysis was required. The original research did, however, focus on the many barriers faced by the women while they were attempting to leave and these barriers were often referred to by the women as evidence of why they stayed. Therefore, as a matter of post hoc interest, it is impossible to discuss rural women’s patterns of resistance in violent relationships without attending to the intersecting oppressions present in their lives. Accordingly, a more concentrated focus on the many barriers (criminal-legal and social support systems) faced by the women, as asked in the original study’s interview schedule, along with a contextual analysis of women’s stay-leave negotiations and their attendant conceptualizations of strength and surviving was required for the current project.

My research questions transcended the overall terms of the original study and the secondary analysis (and attendant back-talk study as discussed below) involved the investigation of novel empirical, methodological, and theoretical questions. The current study involves the investigation of how women in rural areas managed to exercise agency
within the context of violence in their intimate relationships by uncovering the
forms/processes of their resistance/resilience in their stay-leave negotiations.
Specifically, I aimed to discover the ways resistance and strength is
shaped/defined/accomplished, the factors that limit or constrain their decision-making
processes, and how their stay-leave negotiations are simultaneously constituting
intersecting oppressions in rural areas, thereby uncovering women’s own
conceptualizations of strength and surviving.

In addition to the secondary analysis, I conducted semi-structured face-to-face in-
depth qualitative interviews with 12 women from rural Ohio towns similar to the study
site in the original study who also experienced violence in their intimate relationships.
This back-talk study evolved as a concentrated effort to not only collect supplementary
data to update the older existing data due to the passage of time, but also to provide a safe
space for women to critically “talk back” to the findings of the secondary analysis to
obtain their reactions, additional questions and concerns, and uncover additional themes
from their experiences. Back-talk allows for the “participants’ interpretations of the
researchers’ interpretations” (Cardano, 1997, 65, cited from Frisina, 2006). Back-talk is
not a validation process but is intended as an investigation of a “second order,” as a
means to “meta-communicate” the research (Ranci, 1998, as cited in Frisina, 2006). The
back-talk study also allowed for further investigation of how place matters in the lives of
women experiencing violence in intimate relationships in rural areas. Thus, the addition
of back-talk focused interviews not only provided me the opportunity to conduct new
research in the fields of violence against women, rural and public sociology, and feminist
methodologies, but also allowed me to “give back” to the women whose voices have
been marginalized in the academic and social world.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

If rural was considered at all, it was a convenient ‘ideal type’ contrasted with the
criminogenic conditions assumed to exist exclusively in urban locations. Rural
crime was rarely examined, either comparatively with urban crime or as a subject
worthy of investigation in its own right. (Donnermeyer et al., 2006: 199)

In their review of rural crime research, Donnermeyer, Jobes, and Barclay (2006)
correctly point out this gap in the social scientific realm. Encumbering the development
of rural crime research was the long-held assumption that all rural communities were
alike and at the same time, relatively crime-free. Even if rural culture has been paid sparse attention, traditional literature makes much of a rural/urban difference in Western society, presuming the major difference is that there is more homogeneity in rural areas, leading to a more collective control on deviant behavior (Websdale, 1998). This concept of rural homogeneity, however, has been sharply challenged in recent years by those who argue that there are different types of rural communities, and important variations between these communities. Even though a growing number of international scholars have expanded rural crime research since the 1990s, the bulk of their empirical and theoretical investigations are still not informed by any variant of critical criminological thought (DeKeseredy et al., 2007) and, like many other types of criminological inquiry, rural research on crime and its control has been mainly ‘gender-blind’ (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1988). By critically complicating the rural idyll, the current study attempts to shed light on how women navigate their intimate violent relationships within the context of their rural realities.

In addition to the limited theoretical contributions, research on the topic of the decision-making processes of rural women experiencing intimate partner violence, including sexual assault is also lacking (Baker, 1997; Gagne, 1992). There is an increasing amount of literature beginning to highlight the factors that limit or constrain women’s agency in abusive relationships, but most research focuses on leave-taking decisions (see Bowker, 1983; Harris, 1988; Harris & Dewdney, 1994; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Wuest, 1999; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999). There are very few studies dedicated to women’s decisions to stay. To add, most of the limited work on separation/divorce intimate partner violence, regardless of the focus, has been conducted in urban areas. Further, research and theory is lacking on how the decision-making processes for rural women are further constrained by rural patriarchal ideologies.

Theoretically, I attempted to expand DeKeseredy et al.’s (2007) Rural Masculinity Crisis/Male Peer Support Model to include more macro (i.e. failure of social institutions) and micro (i.e. failure of informal support and women’s decisions to stay) level considerations that further constrain women’s abusive intimate relationships. This primary focus on women’s contextualized decision-making processes, specifically the decisions to stay, with a consideration of the social, economic, and criminal-legal
obstacles they confront in the process, enhances the existing model. My dissertation also
contributes to the existing qualitative studies in the literature on violence against women,
specifically with a feminist, rural focus, in an attempt to understand women’s
contextualized decision-making processes as active, rational resistance. If we fail to
account for women’s own perspectives of their experiences with violence, we will
continue to face assistance built on theory, ideology, and/or prior conceptualizations that
are not consonant with women’s lived experiences. Likewise, if we continue to focus our
research on why women do not leave instead of exploring the many barriers that deny
women assistance with this process, the on-going demonstrations of agency and strength
among women will continue to be overlooked and underappreciated in research and in
our social institutions. Thus, in the tradition of feminist action research, my dissertation
attempted to bring marginal voices to the center, listening to their experiences, and
gaining insight into why they have been ignored in social research. I vow to take part in
the dual responsibility to contribute to both the welfare of women and to intellectual and
social knowledge through consciousness-raising and practical policy recommendations.

REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

The methods employed in these studies demonstrate a dedication to reflexive,
nonexploitative research. With this in mind, I continued to critically examine my own
position as a White, working-class, female member of the university throughout the entire
research process. Reinharz (1992) asserts that researchers’ reflexivity helps to address
the ongoing ‘micropolitical’ aspects of work with the participants of a study. To develop
a richer understanding of the issues addressed in this exploratory study and to improve
future research, a qualitative approach is necessary. By employing a qualitative
framework generally and a back-talk focus approach more specifically, the
interrelationships, complexities, and broader contexts of women’s lived experiences are
elucidated. Carefully listening to women’s voices is essential because it “may be the
only way to describe a complex reality for which we have few names” (Mahoney, 1991,
41). We are more equipped to provide a space for their subjective understanding of their
experiences (Massey et al., 1998; Ungar 2004).

Mahoney’s (1991) assertion that there is almost no legal or social science scholarship
that describes an author's experience of violence or even indicates that the author has had
any such experience has recently begun to change in the present decade. Many more scholars, especially in feminist traditions, have publicly criticized ideas of complete objectivity and a ‘neutral stance’ in social science research. Among the myriad examples is Asyan Sev’er, whom explicitly proclaims: “My stance is not neutral. I see little place for a rigidly constrained intellectual interest on violence against women, despite the achings of ‘objectivity’ and/or depersonalization” (2002, 3). Remaining silent on a personal level leads to a professional silence that serves to perpetuate the “social stereotypes that construct battered women as different, exceptional, “other”” (Mahoney, 1991, 15). As a woman with experiences who is also a feminist scholar, I choose to speak and not become a part of the “conspiracy of silence.”

This project stems from not only an objective to fill the previously mentioned gaps in the literature, but it also involves a more personal, private motivation. I believe I was chosen as a research assistant for the Ohio study because I had excellent writing and research skills and a good grasp of the extant social scientific literature on violence against women. I was an eager, dedicated graduate student from rural Ohio, who had volunteered at local women’s shelters in the past (so I had a bit of an “insider” status). It was evident, then, that I also wanted to have a major impact on policy and practice in the field. As a result, I was asked to conduct further investigations into the data and to co-author several publications with the Principal Investigator, Dr. Walter DeKeseredy. I would now like to admit that it is, and always has been, much more than that.

I was that little girl, the one like one of our interviewees mentioned in the Ohio study. I was the one who saw everything and could do nothing. I hid with my baby sister in a closet while my ‘family life’ shattered in front of my eyes. I walked on eggshells, cleaned up the broken glass, and tried to drown out the screams of my mother and father with the humming of lullabies. I watched as my mother closed the door on our ‘private’ troubles and blamed the alcohol for his ‘misbehavior.’ I was a child and I only knew what I could ‘see.’ I saw a weak, helpless woman who obviously didn’t care about me or my sister because if she did, she would have left. She wouldn’t have loved him, or tried to change him, especially in the name of keeping our ‘family’ together. I thought a mother was supposed to be a role model for her daughters. I vowed never to become her. I also vowed that I would never let any man do to me what my father did to her. For a
while, I couldn’t be so lucky. Why did she stay became why did I stay? It was the ultimate question with no clear-cut answer. It took me a while to ‘see’ that this weak, passive, helpless woman was then, and still is, a strong, thriving, survivor. I once had no respect for her decisions, but now appreciate her creative strategies for survival. This renewed consciousness could be due to age or experience or the vast number of women I have come into contact with through working at various shelters, in court, in the classroom, or in the community. To assume I am intimately tied to this work is an understatement. Reading through the transcripts of this study is like reading a page from my own diary. This is the work that allows me to begin to put the pieces back together, to open the door to these ‘private’ troubles, and to publicly voice my respect for my mother and so many women like her. Through the discovery of and attention to the contexts of women’s lived experiences with violence, we begin to recognize the tremendous strength in our friends, our sisters, our daughters, our mothers, and ourselves.

ORGANIZATIONAL ROADMAP

The next chapter highlights the need to think theoretically about masculinities, place, agency and resistance in violent intimate relationships by presenting a literature review of previous research, guided by three theoretical frameworks to understand women’s choices. The first, feminist perspectives of gendered violence, begins with a general overview of feminist perspectives, accentuating the groundbreaking work of the Dobashes’ (1979) analysis on the central role of male domination in battering relationships. Following this discussion is a subsection on ‘doing power’ in intimate violent relationships that asserts that battering is about domination through power and control within the comfort of a patriarchal society. Closely related is the following subsection on ‘doing masculinity’ within rural patriarchies that describes how the culture of manhood is affected when the jobs are gone in rural areas. The rural masculinity crisis/male peer support model is then briefly discussed as one of the few models that attempts to bridge micro-level gender relations with macro-level systems in the rural context. Gender relations at the individual level and broader structural forces, such as rural social and economic transformations, reinforce the notion that women’s exiting their abusive relationship is a threat to a man’s masculinity (DeKeseredy et al., 2005). Second, this section is tied together by a discussion of a paradigm of intersectionalities that asserts
that the interlocking systems of power and oppression are socially constructed and contextually constrained. In addition to the focus on the intersections of race, class, and gender, it is necessary to acknowledge the interplay of place and rural masculinities in research on violence against women. This acknowledgement allows for a greater appreciation for the fact that ‘not all women experience violence equally or in the same way.’ Next, a social constructionist view of agency brings to light the constitutive role of language that reveals the limitations in our language describing choice. It is critical to move away from ‘either/or’ binaries (i.e. stay/leave, agent/victim, good/bad, rational/irrational, etc.) and begin to view women’s decisions to stay in abusive relationships as active, complex, and highly constrained processes (Davis, 2002; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Kirkwood, 1993; Lempert, 1997; Wuest, 1999). It is imperative to contextualize agency as a constrained process of leave-taking/staying decisions because the ways in which we ‘see’ women in abusive situations has serious implications for how we respond to the many violences shaping their lives. These three theoretical approaches are complimented by a fourth, Theories of resistance/resilience. Resistance, regarded as socially constructed, is the topic of much debate in the social science literatures. This section underscores these debates about what resistance/resilience is or can be and how it is accomplished and enacted through the many creative strategies of women experiencing intimate violence. The survivor theory of woman abuse addresses the duality between women’s victimization and agency by proposing that women are active social agents engaged in careful decision-making. As an alternative to Walker’s (1979) learned helplessness perspective, the survivor theory calls attention to the innovative help-seeking strategies of women that remain largely unmet. The overall ‘systemic’ failure to deliver assistance is characterized by the multitude of social, economic, and legal barriers facing women in abusive situations.

These theoretical perspectives guide the research, leading to a discussion of feminist research in rural Ohio in Chapter Three, the research methodology, which is divided into three sections: Background of the existing data from the original qualitative Ohio study, the Study Part I (secondary data analysis of the original study) and the Study Part II (the back-talk study). Briefly, the original Ohio study (conducted between February 2003 and July 2004) was a qualitative study involving semi-structured face-to-face interviews with
43 women who experienced sexual assault by former intimate partners when trying to end or who had ended their relationships with them. The purpose of the study was to explore these experiences and the link to male peer support for sexually aggressive men in rural Ohio. I discuss all aspects of the original Ohio study (i.e. research design, participants, and data collection) in this section. The Study Part I, the secondary analysis of the original Ohio research, highlights women’s decisions to stay and the evidence of their agency through differing forms and processes of resistance, which the original interview schedule did not specifically intend to address. The Study Part II, the back-talk study, provided a safe space for women to “talk back” to the original study’s findings as well as to the secondary analysis. The addition of the back-talk interviews allowed for the collection of supplementary data to update the data collected from the Ohio study ten years prior and led to the investigation of how place (and other rural realities) matters in an effort to add to the current intersectionalities paradigm in the area of intimate violence against women in rural areas.

The findings of the research study are presented in Chapters Four to Six and serve to exemplify the overall theme of the need to contextualize women’s stay-leave negotiations in violent intimate relationships. Chapter Four presents the findings of the secondary data analysis that highlights the many ways in which women survived the rural realities in their abusive relationships with a focus on the failures of their rural criminal-legal systems, highlighting their experiences with police, the legal/judicial systems and orders of protection and their social support systems, discussing social support service invisibility, rural social norms and the nonintervention from neighbors and friends. This chapter also highlights women’s rural realities (i.e. transportation and financial difficulties, especially with regards to the financial strain of single motherhood, and keeping their children safe) and concludes with a display of how women kept the peace amidst very real fears as they learned to survive and stay (but staying strong) in their abusive intimate relationships. Chapter Five presents the findings revealed from the back-talk study in regards to their reactions to the original Ohio study original findings as well as to the findings from the secondary data analysis (as presented in Chapter Four). The first part of this chapter is dedicated to women’s reactions, in the form of talking back to the original study, with regards to the characteristics of men who abuse, which
highlights evidence of male peer support, the attributes of rural community life with regard to perceptions of safety and rural non-intervention norms, and experiences with seeking services in rural areas. The second part of Chapter Five presents women talking back to the secondary data analysis and highlights the overall theme of women’s conceptualizations of themselves as not victim enough due to public stories that create legitimate victims, the misconceptions of sexual abuse, and the perception that staying in abusive relationships doesn’t qualify them as victims or survivors. This section concludes with the ways women conceptualize strength and survival. Chapter Six presents the new themes uncovered by the back-talk analysis and highlights how context matters in the intersectional realities of women’s experiences with violence in their intimate relationships. These findings underscore the importance of viewing women in relation to the contexts of work, age, motherhood, love, and sexual jealousy as the intersection of these realities shape, define, and constrain their stay-leave negotiations within and out of their abusive intimate relationships.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven, presents a summary and discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, future research, methodological and theoretical considerations, and policy recommendations for educating, training and reforming with regards to intimate violence against women in rural areas. This chapter concludes with a depiction of how women are continuing to survive and thrive by sharing their advice to other women and their own plans, goals and hopes for the future. Finally, the Appendix at the end houses all pertinent information regarding the legitimacy of the original Ohio study, as well as recruitment emails, informed consent, interview schedule, and IRB and CHS approval letters for the back-talk study.
CHAPTER II
THINKING THEORETICALLY ABOUT MASCU
LINITIES, PLACE, AGENCY
AND RESISTANCE IN VIOLENT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED VIOLENCE

Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) provide four basic assumptions of feminist
perspectives. First, gender is socially, historically, and culturally constructed. Thus,
gendered violence, such as sexual violence against women, is similarly constructed.
Second, social life and institutions are inextricable from gender and gender relations.
Gendered social systems, as well as criminal-legal systems, legitimize and perpetrate
violence against women (Braithwaite & Daly, 1998; DeKeseredy et al., 2006, 2007).
Third, notions of men’s superiority over women are embedded in social and institutional
structures. Male violence perpetrated against women is sometimes representative of the
men’s expectations of dominance over women (Braithwaite & Daly, 1998; DeKeseredy
et al., 2006, 2007). Fourth, descriptions of and responses to socio-legal constructs,
institutions, and practices must be grounded in women’s lived experiences (Stubbs,
2002). Thus, a feminist response to sexual violence against women must appreciate their
culturally diverse, highly contextual, and socially constructed realities (Seuffert, 1994).
Schneider (1992) insists that we account for the idiosyncrasy of women’s realities and the
generality of linking women’s experiences of abuse to issues of women’s subordination
in society.

In Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy (1979), R.E. and R.P.
Dobash were the first to base an analysis of wife abuse on the idea of male domination.
They argued that wife abuse is a major form of control over women by men that is
supported by an institution of patriarchy in which 'the family' and women's positions as
wives were a part. It is in the institution of the family that patriarchal legacy persists
through the continuation of the hierarchical relationship between men and women
(Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Wives became the ‘appropriate’ victims of abuse due to this
historical patriarchal legacy of men's legal ownership of their wives, along with laws
specifically giving men the right to 'punish' them. Thus, male violence against women is
part of a much larger system of control that serves to secure the dominance of men over
women. The most complete package of challenge to men’s dominance unfolds in cases
of woman-initiated separation, where some men face heightened levels of anxiety, resentment, and feelings of abandonment and will make attempts to regain control (sometimes through violence) (Sev’er, 1997). The physical and/or sexual abuse of women is seen by Stanko (1989) as a manifestation of male domination itself (as a natural right of men) and the fact that not all men exercise this right is irrelevant to the power afforded to them as a gender over women as a gender. The patriarchal ideologies that contribute to women’s subordination are essential to radical feminist perspectives.

Central to a radical feminist understanding of the abuse occurring when women want to exit or have left a relationship is the role of patriarchal dominance and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radford, 1987). Osgood and Chambers (2000) assert:

(T)he domination of women by men across cultures is a consistent international trend and if there is one unifying theme, one seemingly universal thread of patriarchy that inhabits most cultures, it is that of male violence (p. 97).

Many radical feminists theorize the policing of male-to-female victimization. Edwards (1989, 31) argues that the police organization is a “bastion of male authority and interest” that functions on behalf of men to maintain female subordination in intimate relationships. Many police and sheriffs’ departments generally take a nonpunitive approach to men who victimize female partners and do not take male violence against women as seriously as they do predatory street crime (Iovanni & Miller, 2001). This system of patriarchal ideologies and social practices that generally serve to dominate and oppress women operates within a complex gender order, in which ‘doing power’ becomes paramount.

Doing Power in Violent Intimate Relationships

As Chesney-Lind (2006) points out, there is new and important work on the gender/crime nexus that theorizes gender (i.e. “doing gender,” “gender regimes”) that begins to highlight the complex and shifting nature of the gender order. Because men and women are active social agents in their social relations, gender is not simply established prior to these relationships, but is accomplished through social actions (Messerschmidt, 2006). In doing gender, men are also doing dominance, which leads to women doing deference in a society that has given its consent for battering (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Battering (and male violence against women in general) is about
domination through power and control. It lies at the extreme end of the continuum of controls meant to reinforce male dominance of women (DeKeseredy, 1990). Therefore, if violence is the means to “do power” in an intimate relationship (Mahoney, 1991), it is imperative to be cognizant of the constant interplay of power and control, and domination and subordination in violent intimate relationships. Sev’er (2002) asserts that the gendered and unequal distribution of power and resources and a differentially valued division of labor operates within a patriarchal system that fuels and protects these inequalities.

Patriarchy can be defined as a system of social stratification which employs a wide range of social control policies and practices to ratify male power, preserving girls’ and women’s subordination to men (Chesney-Lind, 2006). Susan Brownmiller (1975) observes that patriarchy, the full-blown male solidification of power, originated from the establishment of a rudimentary, mate-protectorate through man’s violent capture and rape of the female. She asserts that the beginning of the male concept of ownership (of women and children) was due to this forcible extension of his boundaries to his female mate and later to their offspring. Often characterized as typical, the physical and/or sexual abuse of women is a manifestation of male domination and it is seen to be a natural right of men (Stanko, 1989). A social order steeped in a patriarchal gendered hierarchy has promoted and preserved violence against women by recognizing male power and privilege, thereby relegating a secondary status to women (Goetting, 1999).

Historically, in the specific gendered organization of private and public life, a man’s life centers around full-time employment outside of the home while a woman’s work is in the home raising the children. These divisions in gender ‘roles’ translate into economic inequalities with regards employment and income (Dempsey, 1987). Arlie Hochschild’s (1992, 512) study of 52 heterosexual couples over an eight year period exemplifies not only the persistent wage gap between men and women in the public sphere of work, but also a ‘leisure gap’ between them in the home where “most women work one shift at the office or factory and a ‘second shift’ at home.” The value for the practice of successfully accomplishing masculinity becomes effectively challenged if women can do what “real men” do in the workplace (Messerschmidt, 2007). Men’s relation to patriarchy differs in patterned ways depending on where they are socially located (Bograd, 2005) and men
situationally accomplish masculinities in accordance with their positions in social structures and their access to power and resources (Messerschmidt, 2007). Some men employ violence as a suitable resource for doing masculinity within their specific social contexts of their intimate relationships. It is then necessary to investigate how patriarchy (displayed through various masculinities) is embodied in differential enactments based on these locations.

Doing Masculinity: Rural Patriarchies

Masculinity is a historical, social, and cultural construction. It is a constantly changing collection of meanings constructed through personal and social relationships and with our world (Kimmel, 2003). The dominant U.S. culture upholds the masculinity that defines ‘white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men’ as the masculinity that sets the standards for all other men, against which they are measured and often found wanting (Kimmel, 2003, 85). Connell (1987) states that in order for patriarchy to be maintained and sustained on the large scale, the construction of hypermasculine identities is required. We equate ‘manhood’ with this hypermasculinity that embodies the ideals of toughness, aggression, and strength, control and dominance, being capable and successful, and ruthlessly renouncing all things feminine. The cultural definition of manhood is dominated by the fear of being seen as a sissy (read feminine), with violence being the single most evident marker of manhood (Kimmel, 2003).

But, Kimmel (2007, 101) insists that we focus on how men experience their masculinity: “Masculinity is not, however, the experience of power; it is the experience of entitlement to power.” Violence may be the enactment of a man’s sense of entitlement to patriarchal power, rather than his actual ‘real’ power. Recognizing masculinity as a gendered violence of entitlement speaks directly to the common finding in the rape and domestic violence literatures that many men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they felt entitled. A challenge to men’s dominance is revealed in cases of women-initiated separations where some men face heightened levels of anxiety, resentment, and feelings of abandonment and will attempt to regain ‘rightful’ control through displays of violence (Sev’er, 1997, 2002; Goetting, 1999; Kirkwood, 1993; Mahoney, 1991; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999; DeKeseredy et. al., 2006, 2008; Websdale, 2008).
generally and job loss in rural areas specifically.

In dead end, menial jobs that show little or no opportunity for advancement or with
an overall lack of ‘legitimate’ jobs, it becomes increasingly difficult for men to fulfill
their end of the patriarchal bargain. In Fine and colleagues’ (2005) interviews with
Puerto Rican battered women, to ser un hombre (be a man) became more challenging in
the midst of legitimate job loss accompanied by the lure of the street life of drugs and
violence. Similarly, Kimmel (2007), with regard to ethnic nationalist violence and the
sense of gendered entitlement to power, describes a group of resentful young men who
were unable to express their manhood through the traditional avenues of economic
autonomy, control over their labor, and a sense of political and social place, so they
restored their damaged patriarchal masculinity through American white supremacist
groups. Weis and colleagues (2005) compare the “value” of the African American man
as having historically been circumscribed by a racist U.S. labor market to the “value” of
a white working-class man. They argue that although still privileged by whiteness, the
white working-class man’s worth has weakened in both economic and domestic spheres.
Changes in the nature (or even existence) of work have been linked to shifts in the
performance of masculinities and femininities (Brandt & Haugen, 2000; Saugeres, 2002;
to as “gendered violence and the architecture of rural life” is just now coming to fruition.

Rural areas in the United States are currently in a state of economic transformation
(some say crisis) that has powerfully influenced the social and cultural composition of
rural societies and the performance of various masculinities within these areas. Even in
the wake of these significant structural and socio-cultural changes, traditional forms of
masculinity abound in rural areas that hold securely to the separate spheres ideology of
private patriarchy. In general, private patriarchy leaves women socially and
economically disempowered and dependent on their intimate partners due to its sustained
focus on parenting and domestic roles in the household (Pruitt, 2008). Rural women are
further spatially disempowered by virtue of their physical location in the rural area as

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3 I would also add, to a racist society in general, including, especially, the criminal-legal system in the mass
disproportionality of incarceration rates among African American males.
well as in the home. If masculinity is directly and powerfully tied to paid labor force participation, and if power is the reward for doing masculinity well (Gilbert & Webster, 1982), what happens to men’s power when the ‘traditionally male’ jobs are gone?

Jennifer Sherman’s (2005) research on masculinity, rural poverty, and family stability argues that men’s experience with masculinity in times of economic and labor market stress can seriously undermine their abilities to sustain functioning relationships. She found that with the closing of the last sawmill in Golden Valley, California in 1996, jobs have dramatically shifted from the forest sector towards education and retail services, making it easier for more women to fill these traditionally ‘feminine’ or ‘pink collar’ jobs. In Golden Valley, although it is still considered a norm and marker of success for a woman to stay home raising a family while the man works; it is becoming more commonplace for men to stay at home while women go to work. Here, gender roles (traditional or not), are not the primary focus for women as they fight for economic and familial survival. On the other hand, some of the men of Golden Valley, especially the most traditional, had more difficulty coming to terms with this shift. These men engaged in illegal activities in order to ‘afford’ to keep their wives at home, while others simply chose poverty in order to retain a sense of control over the household. In this sense, masculine identity is strongly connected to providing: “being a husband and father meant being the provider and head of household, at whatever cost” (Sherman, 2005, 24). There were other men who were able to let go of the bread-winner, hypermasculine ideologies in order to rewrite the expectations of fatherhood. More than half of these men grew up with mothers who had worked so they may have developed a greater acceptance of working women at an earlier age (Sherman, 2005). Still, these men who exhibited greater role flexibility conveyed a strong sense of satisfaction with their marriages, their roles as fathers, and themselves as men. Sherman’s (2005) work exhibits a distinctive set of responses to poverty and unemployment and highlights the ways in which some men challenge culturally “appropriate” patterns of rural masculinities (emphasis mine). Other men’s attempts to reconstruct damaged patriarchal masculinities can be viewed as a ‘homo-social enactment’ in that their manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval and women are used as a type of currency that men exploit to “improve their ranking on
the masculine social scale” (Kimmel, 2003, 87). This homosocial enactment can be exhibited through male peer support.

*Rural Masculinity Crisis/Male Peer Support Model*

Guided in part by DeKeseredy and colleagues’ (2004) feminist/male peer support model of separation/divorce sexual assault, DeKeseredy and colleagues’ (2007) rural masculinity crisis model adds the important context of rurality. This new theory allows for consideration of micro-level gender relations and broader structural forces (i.e. unemployment generated by rural social and economic transformations). This model asserts that in rural U.S. communities, male privilege is supported by a patriarchal ideology that encourages and legitimates the abuse of women who violate the ideals of male power and control over women in intimate relationships (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). This belief system is characterized by a rigid gendered division of labor that divides men into the primary ‘bread winners’ and women into ‘caretakers’ of children and the home (Fassinger & Schwarzweller, 1994). Rural men’s masculine identity has become challenged due to rural social and economic shifts (i.e. decline in the number of family-owned farms, closing of small industries, sawmills and coalmines, and women seeking employment due to less family income) (Hogg & Carrington, 2006).

DeKeseredy (2007) adds that to compensate for their lack of economic power, many unemployed rural men who strongly adhere to the ideology of familial patriarchy, exert more control over their wives. Rural women’s individual experiences are integrated into a larger set of economic and social structural factors (Donnermeyer et al., 2006). The constant evolution of these social forces potentially creates or reinforces new forms of patriarchy. Further, in an effort to repair their damaged patriarchal masculinity, many rural men turn to their peers to support the use of violence against the women in their lives (Messerschmidt, 1993).

Male peer support refers to “the attachments to male peers and the resources that these men provide which encourage and legitimate woman abuse” (DeKeseredy, 1990, 130). DeKeseredy et al. (2006) found that many rural Ohio men can rely on their male friends and neighbors, including those who are police officers, to support a violent

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4 “Separation/divorce sexual assault” refers to sexual assault occurring when women are wanting to end, planning to end, are trying to end, are in the process of ending, or have ended a relationship with a marital/cohabiting partner (DeKeseredy et al., 2004).
patriarchal status quo. This tolerance of woman abuse by society, including local law enforcement officials, fluctuates greatly within different rural regions of the U.S. (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Gagne, 1992; Websdale, 1998). This fluctuation contributes to an uneven distribution of community norms about violence against women, affecting the informal and formal assistance available to survivors of sexual assault across rural places (DeKeseredy et al., 2007).

DeKeseredy and colleagues (2006) found that many rural battered women could not turn to their neighbors for assistance with personal problems due to their adherence and enforcement of what Browning (2002) refers to as “non-intervention norms.” Many researchers have found that the pervasiveness of these community norms prohibit women from publicly discussing their experiences with abuse and from seeking support. This situation obviously contributes to survivors’ social isolation and enables perpetrators to ‘feed off of’ it (Websdale, 1998), which can influence these women to consider leaving or actually exiting their marriages (Sherman, 2005). Individual’s patriarchal belief systems reinforce the notion that women’s exiting their abusive relationships is a threat to men’s masculinity (DeKeseredy et al., 2005). This individual-level value-system is instituted in rural patriarchal ideologies evident in social systems. For instance, Websdale’s (1998) study exemplified evidence of a powerful “ol,’ boys’ network” that oppresses and brutalizes women, further precluding women in abusive relationships from seeking and/or receiving assistance and protection. Gagne’s (1992) study of Appalachian women trying to leave abusive relationships showed that many of these women were not only victimized, but also further convinced by their complete lack of support that they (at least temporarily) had no alternative but to put up with their oppressive conditions in the home. Thus, the triangulation of gender, power, and control constructs relations in the public and private spheres of work, education, politics, health, and law, as well as in intimate relationships. Chesney-Lind (2006) emphasizes the imperative to view patriarchal interests as overlapping with systems that also serve to reinforce class and race privileges in order to recognize the unique need for feminist criminologies to maintain focus on intersectionalities in research.

INTERSECTIONALITIES

We exist in various social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power (i.e. race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and oppressions (i.e. prejudice, class stratification, gender inequality and heterosexist bias, etc.) and no dimension should be privileged in explaining violence against women (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Scholars tend to regard these systems of power as individual characteristics of identity, not as interlocking social structures that perpetuate and legitimate inequalities. Further, relying on simplistic gendered (and raced and classed) binaries minimizes these hierarchical structural forms of oppression and serves to limit a more inclusive consideration of the contexts of violence (Erbaugh, 2007). Sokoloff (2008) asserts that an intersectional analysis views the historic nature of specific groups of people in ways that capture the interlocking relations between systems of oppression and discrimination and reveals that privilege does not exist without domination. With regards the study of violence against women, women’s oppression is often multiplied by their location at the intersections of systems of power. Kanuha (1996, 41) declares that the “tag line that domestic violence affects everyone equally trivializes both the dimensions that underlie the experience of these particular abuse victims and more important, the ways we analyze the prevalence and impact of violence against them.”

Intersecting Oppressions

Collins (2000) embraces a paradigm of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and the individual and collective agency of Black women to reconceptualize the social relations of domination and resistance. Her discussion of the matrix of domination highlights the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power and her argument, although developed from the standpoint of U.S. Black women, is meant to stimulate discussions about empowerment. Her primary argument is that individuals differentially experience and resist domination, create subjugated knowledges within their overlapping cultural contexts (intersections), and experience empowerment by constructing new knowledges (as an alternative to hegemonic ideologies), and thus define reality in their own terms. Although the intersectionalities approach is predominantly applied to research on women and men of color, those with ‘immigrant’ status, and individuals identified as lesbian, gay, bi-or
trans-sexual/gendered, or ‘queer,’ the intersectional paradigm can also be applied to white men and women.

Weis and colleagues (2005, 227) view ‘whiteness’ not as an unmarked category or an assumed norm, but as a gendered social construction: “to be a white working-class woman, in part, means to desire a stable, intact family, with a husband able to support it within a globalized economy that has increasingly made the goal difficult, if not impossible.” Their study of 30 white working-class women from New York and New Jersey show the differences and hardships faced by those who stayed in abusive relationships (‘settled lives’) and those who left (‘hard living’). Hard living women left the “ideal’ domestic sphere for a public sphere of welfare, poverty, and homelessness and serve as public evidence of the myth of sacred domestic ideologies that the settled lives women fall prey to. Hoff’s (1990) interviews with women who were forced to leave their homes due to violent intimate relationships revealed a dual vision of what being a woman means (i.e. mothering and caring versus independence and ‘taking care of everything’) and found they were left to face a harsh reality of single parenthood and chronic housing problems. Stanko (1989) also acknowledges that battered women are well aware of their contradictory demands as women and that getting out is almost as bad as staying in the relationship. “Batterers often use the political and economic vulnerability of women to reinforce their power and dominance over particular women [and they] are frequently bolstered by the stigmatization of victims through the use of gender social norms that define the ‘good’ woman (wife/mother)” (Coker, 1999, 39-40). Among the sparse literature that speaks to the relationship between race and gendered violence, there is even less that locates white women at the intersection of their own race, class, and gender (Weis et al., 2005). Due to the ‘middle-classness’ of both the leaders and the aims of the second wave feminist movement, women of color have rejected aspects of the movement because it was viewed as raced (‘white’), and poor and working-class white women have not embraced the movement because it was classed (middle-class).

In current sociological research, class analysis is the least developed in the trinity of race, class, and gender investigations (Gimenez, 2001). The struggle against male violence is one tightly bound to an economic system which does not put people first.
(Stanko, 1989). *Every woman is a man or a divorce away from welfare.* Battered women and their children are the ones most always driven from their homes in order to save their lives and the price some pay for this freedom is extremely high. Those who manage to escape often confront a male-dominated political-legal system that supports the ideology of marriage (and the violence within it) as a private matter, yet ignores the very public nature of their need for public assistance (i.e. housing, welfare, etc.). ‘Freedom' from violence within the confines of a society that is structured to meet the needs of men, not single women and mothers, negates a complete portrayal of women’s experiences of violence both in the private and public spheres (Kirkwood, 1993).

Meeting at the intersections of gender, race, and class, is also space (conceptualized here as place).

*Intersection of Place*

A place-based analysis considers particular locales (i.e. rural areas) and accounts for their distinctions from one another (i.e. accommodating the continuum between rural and urban areas) (Pruitt, 2008). Just as race and class analyses should not rank oppressions; a place-based analysis of the problem of intimate violence in rural areas is not intended to depict rural women as better as or worse off than their urban counterparts. The purpose is to reveal how the spatial circumstances and the attendant consequences are imperative for a fuller understanding of the realities that rural women face. For instance, Pruitt (2008) discusses rural living as defined by many in terms of literal, social, and economic space. Literal space describes the physical isolation from other people, jobs, opportunities, and services, the lack of transportation (public and/or private) and poor roads. Social isolation and the lack of anonymity constructs the social space in which rural people live and serves to limit their subjectivity and agency so that social isolation can often compliment spatial isolation. The spatio-economic landscape of many rural areas is characterized by a low population density that often impedes the achievement of economies of scale, with limited and undiversified labor markets being the norm. Pruitt (2008) sums up the economic space of many rural areas: poverty is high and intergenerational; housing options are limited; job opportunities and training services are rare; a broad rural-urban education gap is ever-present; and child-care options are sparse.

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6 Cited in Hoff (1990, 223).
In 1999, 42 percent of working female-headed households in rural America lived in poverty and half of those had incomes less than half of the poverty threshold (Pruitt, 2008). To add, there seems to be a correlation with the financial consequences for individual families who experience devastation from local economies (i.e. job/farm loss, closing factories, outsourcing, etc.) and increased incidences of domestic violence. Women whose household incomes are under $10,000 experience domestic violence at a rate of five times that of women having household incomes exceeding $30,000 (Pruitt, 2008).

Attending to the uniqueness of rurality is imperative in sociological research, but most importantly, to the lives of rural women in intimate violent relationships. In foregrounding the roles of gender, race, class, space, masculinities, and patriarchies in research on violence against women, the notion that ‘not all women experience violence equally or in the same way’ is clearly evident. These multiple intersections of power and oppression, like concepts of agency and resistance, are not monolithic, static, or rigid. These intersectionalities shape our individual experiences, intimate and familial relations, and community and social locations. They also are constrained by our individual and social location and impact our decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AGENCY

Social construction theories highlight how social phenomena develop in a particular context, uncovering the ways in which individuals make sense of, participate in, and construct their social realities (Gergen, 2001). The concept of human agency is not universally accepted by social constructionists (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Most sociologists, however, agree that humans are fundamentally active beings and being alive requires action (Hitlen & Elder, 2007). Therefore, human agency is inextricably social as it is structured by interactional situations, which stretches the perimeters of constructionist thought to interactionist perspectives as well. The sociological issue then is not whether agency exists, but the extent to which we exercise it and the circumstances that assist or impede that exercise (Berger, 1991).
Constitutive Role of Language

Ferraro (2003) calls attention to the constitutive role of language in creating, maintaining, and changing social relations and constructing social realities. Applying a label of ‘victim’ to women experiencing abuse organizes an understanding of them as particular ‘types’ to whom certain attributes are ascribed and orientations taken (Holstein & Miller, 1990). The binaries and stereotypes associated with “battered” women (i.e. poor, weak, passive, and nagging women who deserve it) fail to appreciate the multi-dimensionality and complexity of how women define and understand their own experiences (Kelly, 1988). For women in abusive relationships, the labels of “victim” or “abused woman” have negative consequences that may impede their help-seeking processes. Wuest and Merrit-Gray (1999) found that in order to access protection or qualify for services, many women experiencing abuse must ‘measure up’ to societal standards. These formal and informal norms of who is deserving of help act as a double-edged sword. If women meet the criteria, they get offered assistance (which may or may not be helpful) but as a consequence, they get to bear the label ‘battered woman.’ This label is sometimes applied as though it “constitutes a separate and unique category of womanness, as though it is an identity, a mark that sets one apart rather than being simply a descriptive term…as the sole defining characteristic of a woman’s identity…it is a label that appears to strip us of dignity, to deny that there has been any integrity in the relationship we are in” (hooks, 2007, 272). The woman’s view of herself is publicly reframed and the community (including both informal and formal support systems) expects her to behave as a passive, helpless victim and accept whatever assistance was offered (Newman, 1993). These women recognize the difficulty and necessity of living as ‘battered women’ and ‘victims’ in their complex processes of surviving abusive relationships (Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999).

Sev’er (2002) cautions that it is imperative to be astute to the balance of emphasizing the 'agency of women' without totally disregarding the 'victimization' they have suffered (or continue to suffer). Victimization is often denied by rendering it invisible or undescribed as social stereotypes are often employed to neutralize or obscure the presence of human suffering: women are deprived of care, justice, and services (Kanuha, 1996). Focusing on some details of women’s experiences and ignoring others reduces
women’s abusive relationships to ‘incidences’ of violence, erases their multi-
dimensionality, and further reduces women to victims (Denzin, 1984). Lempert (1997)
emphasizes the incongruous duality between women’s victimization and agency:

The “victims” are also active agents defining, interpreting, and negotiating with
their partners and with others. As “victims” they are not entirely passive and as
“agents” they are not co-acting equals in their interactions with male partners.
Their help-seeking overtures occur within complex relational dynamics that both
limit and evoke external assistance (p. 291).

In their study of ‘settled lives’ and ‘hard living’ women, Weis and colleagues (2005)
found that the ‘good’ woman who stays home, cares for her children and husband, and
‘plays by the rules’ was romanticized and the ‘bad’ woman who flees home, lives in
poverty, and relies on social services was demonized, although both ‘types’ of women
came from the same community and differ only in the extent to which they expose their
“private troubles” to public view. Further, classifications of ‘appropriate’ victims are
also codified in social policy. For example, in some states, domestic violence legal
statutes are written in a type of language that ensures services to heterosexual persons
only and is often defined as “culturally normal for groups different from the dominant
white culture” (Bograd, 2005, 30). As shown earlier, these classifications have extreme
consequences for women and their children. Even if certain women are deemed
“legitimate” victims, services may be scarce or nonexistent. The actual availability or
accessibility of ‘formally present’ legal and social services implicates cultural, racial,
class, or economic privilege (Bograd, 2005, 33).

Contextualized Agency

Leaving a battering relationship, like all uncoupling, is a process rather than an
event. Research suggests that that the leave-taking process takes an average of eight years
(Horton & Johnson, 1993) and that women leave their abusive partners an average of five
times before leaving permanently (Okun, 1986). The intimate partner violence/domestic
violence/woman abuse/battering literature reflects the contradiction between the
destructive consequences of violence on battered women and the decision of many to
remain in or leave the relationship (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1999). This literature spans
the broad disciplines of psychology, social psychology, nursing, sociology, criminology,
health care, and law. With few exceptions, the usual focal point is on describing women
as victims trapped in their relationships as a result of their psychological makeup or socioeconomic circumstances. The language that women use in coping is seldom the focus of investigation; however, Eisikovits and Buchbinder (1999) found that women try to avoid perceiving themselves as victims in their violent relationships by using rationalizations and by creating accounts that are mutually validating. The women in their study provided ‘normatively acceptable’ explanations for men’s violence to regain control over their lives.

In the context of deciding to stay or leave abusive relationships, women are active agents engaged in on-going processes of creating meaning for themselves and their situations. Lempert (1996) asserts that it is imperative for research to focus on how survivors interpret their abusive relationships and how those meaning-making interpretations affect their help-seeking processes, rather than concentrating on what they do. The process of surviving abusive relationships emphasizes the interrelationships of emotional, practical, and structural barriers (Kirkwood, 1993). The documentation of these obstacles (i.e. difficulty obtaining essential financial assistance, a safe place to live, and suitable counseling) that contribute to women’s revictimization by the system have been previously documented. In addition, Humphries (1995) found that when children are involved, women’s primary concern were issues with day-to-day living. In this context, women’s energies were attuned to keeping their children safe and creating order out of disorder in the home. As active, resilient social agents, women negotiating in violent relationships may be assertive or passive in weighing alternatives, making plans, trying out strategies, and attempting to protect themselves and their children (Sev’er, 2002). They sometimes call police or contact other formal social agencies and many often turn to informal social support networks (DeKeseredy et al., 2006, 2007). Many women also utilize forms of passivity as a survival strategy: inaction through keeping the peace or ‘giving in’ to unwanted sex, redefining the situation, and reevaluating their positions (Basile, 1999; Kelly, 1988). These behaviors are not necessarily irrational or

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unreasonable but may be what kept them alive (Mahoney, 1991). There is agency in silence and inaction in violent relationships and it is imperative to acknowledge that the attempts to stay produced active strategies and traits that reflect normality, not a malformed psychology (Kirkwood, 1993). Regardless of the strategies used, women’s negotiations required an enormous amount of effort. As highlighted above, these women exercise agency differently than the ‘traditional’ concept of agency put forth by other researchers. They do so in interaction with constrained situations and impeding social structures. A contextualized discussion of agency thus necessitates a critical analysis of resistance.

THEORIES OF RESISTANCE/RESILIENCE

Resistance is a deeply sociological concept and studying resistance may assist in restoring the balance between oppression and agency (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Like agency, the concept of resistance is socially constructed and is also interactional by nature, as it is defined by perceptions of the resisters’ behavior and also by other’s reactions to the behavior. Foucault (1978, 95) highlights the central role of power in resistance: “Where there is power, there is resistance.” Hollander & Einwohner (2004) suggest that resistance and domination have a cyclical relationship as domination leads to resistance, which leads to the further exercise of power; thus, provoking further resistance. Resistance can be individual or collective, confined locally or widespread, and identity- or politically-based. It is usually ‘employed’ as forms of opposition to counter, contradict, change, reject, challenge, rethink, question and/or disrupt. Common modes of resistance may include silence, rape victims speaking out about their victimization, and Hawaiian women speaking their native language. There is much debate on whether or not resistance must be recognized as such by others. For instance, Kanuha’s (1999, 39) investigation of “passing” among gays and lesbians is an empirical example of resistance even though oppositional claims-making is avoided to conceal identity: “the maintenance of a false performance was for the purpose of opposing those forces that would threaten or harm them in specific social encounters.” The idea of intent of resistance, difficult to assess, is also contested. If an actor intends to resist, then their actions qualify as resistance, regardless of the scope or outcome but an actor may not
even be conscious that his or her action ‘qualifies’ as resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

There is considerable disagreement and ambiguity about what precisely the concept of resistance denotes because it is not always ‘pure’ (i.e. women who fight back\(^9\) or women who stay,\(^{10}\) for any length of time, in violent relationships). For instance, Fine and colleagues’ (2005) study of Puerto Rican women’s experience in violent relationships demonstrates a ‘radical reshaping of resistance’ in which the women insisted on remaining in their homes, with their children, in their communities, voicing a quiet but profound critique, and always producing hope. Resistance operates within multiple systems of hierarchy so that an individual can be simultaneously powerless and powerful within these different systems. Thus, the social, cultural and historical context in which resistance takes place is of vital importance. Abraham’s (2000) study of South Asian battered women’s strategies of resistance serves to challenge the idea that abuse and passivity are synonymous as there are many creative strategies in resisting abuse through marriage. Some of these women’s resistance strategies included silence, confrontation, hiding, talking back, hitting back, challenging the abuser’s fiscal control, contemplating and resisting suicide, and seeking informal and formal social service assistance. Furthermore, the perceptions of ethnic and class distinctions shaped the women’s resistant responses. As indicated, the notion of battered women as survivors is intricately threaded throughout discussions of resistance.

**Survivor Theory**

A fundamental theoretical issue is raised in the contention that battered women are survivors in that a ‘survivor’ theory contradicts prevailing conceptions of “learned helplessness.” Walker’s (1979) theory of learned helplessness maintains that women experiencing violence in their relationships become increasingly complacent in the face of escalating abuse and eventually ‘give up’ by abandoning their help-seeking efforts altogether. In this light, these women are portrayed as ‘psychologically paralyzed,’ helpless, and passive, requiring counseling and psychotherapy to teach them how to control their own lives (Walker, 1979). While giving a brief nod to the economic, legal,

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\(^9\) see Kanuha, 1996; Richie, 1996

\(^{10}\) see Sokoloff, 2008; Stanko, 1989; Mahoney, 1991; Hoff, 1990
and social obstacles in women’s decisions to stay, Walker (1979) concluded that battered women have become blind to their options.

As a distinct alternative to the learned helplessness perspective, Gondolf and Fisher’s (1988) survivor theory focuses on factors influencing women’s decision-making process in abusive relationships, primarily on the decision whether or not to return to the batterer after leaving the shelter. They concluded that women responded to abuse in their relationships by seeking assistance from informal and formal support, which was largely unmet. The survivors were innovative in their help-seeking strategies, but financial constraints and the lack of information about escape options and available resources, caused them to stay in their relationships rather than attempting to leave (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). These women continued to seek help despite barriers, but their efforts were often impeded by obstacles within potential support sources.

Specific life circumstances and contextual factors influence women’s decisions to stay, leave, or return to abusive relationships (Baker, 1997). Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found women with their own transportation, childcare, and a source of income were the most likely to make the decision to leave their batterer. However, there are many women, especially in rural areas, without these resources. Women are often isolated by their abusive spouses from access to formal or informal support and few know where to turn for help (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006). Some women are reluctant to seek support for fear of retaliation from their abusive partners (Homer et al., 1985). In fact, services that might be available in rural areas (i.e. protection orders, arrest and prosecution policies, and shelters) may instigate retaliation from abusive men and prove more dangerous for women to leave their relationships than to stay in them (Dugan et al., 2003). As Bergen & Bogle (1996) discovered in their study of marital rape, many informal and formal social support resources do not provide sufficient aid to women. Often, many women who turn to formal social support services are met with frustration and discouragement (Harris, 1988). For example, Johnson (1985) observed that police responses to domestic violence often consider marital privacy over the woman’s safety, highlighting the hesitancy of officers’ involvement in ‘private’ matters. Websdale (1995, 1998) discusses how this ‘hesitancy’ of the criminal-legal system involvement may be part of a larger system of patriarchal ideology in many rural areas.
Women stay or leave abusive relationships based on their current needs and perceived alternatives (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Harris and Dewdney (1994) contend that women abandon help-seeking and stay in abusive relationships not because of learned helplessness but because the resources they turn to fail to meet their needs. They believe that this failure, in addition to the reasons cited above, rests in the tendency of potential assistance services to focus on psychological help to treat learned helplessness. ‘Psychologizing’ women’s decisions to stay in abusive relationships locates the source of male battering within women, further compounding the leaving process. This ‘treatment’ of women experiencing abuse has immense consequences for shaping informal and formal responses and acts as an additional barrier to help-seeking (Harris & Dewdney, 1994). Concepts like learned helplessness (i.e. Stockholm syndrome and battered women’s syndrome) contribute to images of women in abusive relationships as psychologically defective and in need of ‘empowerment.’ The process of empowerment or ‘giving power’ back implies that these women were powerless, passive, and without agency to begin with, which we have seen, is not the case for many women. As Stanko (1989, 19) declares: “Women do resist. Women are survivors…our survival is our strength, our experiences the reminders that there is much more work to do.” Revealing the complexities of women’s experiences and struggles during and after separating from a violent partner reconstitutes violence against women as a public crisis that demands critical attention. The intent of this research is to do just that.

11 Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response (an emotional attachment to the abductor, regardless of the danger) sometimes seen in hostages that has often been applied to women in abusive situations as an adaptive way of surviving (i.e. Graham et al., 1988).

12 Battered Women’s Syndrome, as first articulated in 1979 by Lenore E. Walker, was originally used in homicide cases in which women killed their abusers (Ferraro, 2003). This “syndrome” contributes to an image of battered women as psychologically defective or pathological and diverts attention from the rational and deliberate strategies of survival that women employ when they are in violent situations (Ferraro, 2003).
CHAPTER III

IN THE HEART OF IT ALL: FEMINIST RESEARCH IN RURAL OHIO

Research on the topic of separation/divorce sexual assault among poor rural women requires sensitivity across multiple methodological areas. An action-oriented investigation stresses that the researcher be ethical, culturally sensitive, and aware of the existence of culturally relevant barriers (Kennedy, 2005). We must recognize that cultural and gender stereotypes, race loyalty, well founded fears of an insensitive and racist judicial system and language are important aspects of women’s lives (Kanuha, 1994).

BACKGROUND: EXISTING DATA FROM AN OHIO STUDY\(^{13}\)

The original qualitative Ohio study comprised of one-on-one in-depth interviews with 43 rural women was supported by a National Institute of Justice Grant 2002-WG-BX-0004 and financial assistance was provided by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Office of Research and Graduate Studies at Ohio University (which granted Institutional Review Board approval\(^{14}\)). The grant started on September 1, 2002 and concluded on January 1, 2004. The Principal Investigator, Dr. Walter DeKeseredy, currently of Crime, Justice & Policy Studies at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, has given his written permission for me to use all of the data in his original study. The data from the Ohio study is currently available to the public via the University of Michigan's Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (No. 4309). My official role in this study was that of a research assistant while attending Ohio University until June, 2002. I have continued to analyze transcripts, write articles, and publish on these data since the official ending of this project.

The methods employed in the Ohio study demonstrate a dedication to reflexive, nonexploitative research. With this in mind, I continue to critically examine my own position as a White, working-class, female member of the university throughout the entire research process, including the secondary analysis. Reinharz (1992) asserts that researchers’ reflexivity helps to address the ongoing ‘micropolitical’ aspects of work with

\(^{13}\) Arguments and findings included in my dissertation are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, Ohio University, or Dr. Walter S. DeKeseredy.

\(^{14}\) Please see Appendix I for Ohio University IRB Approval for this study.
the participants of a study. To develop a richer understanding of the issues addressed in this exploratory study and to improve future research, a qualitative approach is necessary. By employing a qualitative framework, the interrelationships, complexities, and broader contexts of women’s lived experiences are elucidated. Carefully listening to women’s voices is essential because it “may be the only way to describe a complex reality for which we have few names” (Mahoney, 1991, 41). We are more equipped to provide a space for their subjective understanding of their experiences (Massey et al., 1998; Ungar 2004).

Research Design and Participants

Broad Operational Definitions from the Original Study ¹⁵

That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible; powerless to inform or transform our consciousness of our experience, our understanding, our vision, powerless to claim its own existence.


Not restricted to functions only of proximity, separation and divorce was defined as physically, legally, or emotionally ¹⁶ exiting a marital or cohabitating relationship.

Because sexual assault takes on a variety of shapes and forms, like the physical and psychological abuses of women, the definition employed in this study is not restricted to forced penetration. The types of sexual assault experienced by the women interviewed in the study are classified as: sexual contact: sex play (i.e. fondling, kissing, or petting) arising from menacing verbal pressure, misuse of authority, threats of harm, or actual physical force; sexual coercion: unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of menacing verbal pressure or the misuse of authority; attempted rape: attempted unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of or threats of force, or the use of drugs or alcohol, and rape: unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of or threats of force and other unwanted sex acts (i.e. anal or oral intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) arising from the use of or threat of force, or the use of drugs or alcohol.


¹⁶ Emotionally exiting a relationship is defined as women’s denial or restriction of sexual relations and other intimate exchanges (DeKeseredy, 2007).
A key risk factor for the sexual assault of the rural women in this study was identified as patriarchal male peer support. DeKeseredy (1990, 130) has defined male peer support as “attachments to male peers and the resources they provide which encourage and legitimate woman abuse.”

The term rural is often restricted to a narrow definition that denotes a small population size or living in the countryside. In addition to this small population size and/or density, rural communities are described as those where people know each other’s business, come into regular contact with each other, and share a larger core of values than is true of people in urban areas (Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999).

Studying separation/divorce sexual assault in rural communities is difficult because they are characterized by social and geographic isolation (Logan, Walker, & Leukefeld, 2001), limited job opportunities and poverty (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006), the absence of public transportation (Lewis, 2003), the existence of a powerful “ol’ boys network” (Websdale, 1998) and a plethora of other factors identified elsewhere. These factors all act as potential barriers that may prevent women from revealing their abusive experiences to researchers. However, some of these methodological obstacles were minimized using techniques employed in the Ohio study. The first component of the project – preparatory research – proved to be invaluable to the original research.

The Preparatory Phase

The preparatory phase involved ongoing contact with a group of leading researchers in the field, local shelter staff, sexual assault survivor advocates, police officers, mental health workers, and others with a vested interest in curbing violence against women. In supporting this research, this group also sensitized the research team to significant concerns not taken into account in the existing social scientific literature on separation/divorce sexual assault, such as the influence of broader Ohio state politics (DeKeseredy et al., 2006). Furthermore, the group assisted in the development of helpful screening questions and a semi-structured interview schedule, provided contacts with service providers and criminal justice officials throughout Ohio, and referred six of the 43 women who participated in this study to the research team. This element of the research methodology helped to build bridges to the service providers. It also served to contribute

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17 Please see Appendix III for the Interview schedule used in the original Ohio study.
to a broad definition of sexual assault that incorporates a more complete range of sexual behaviors that many women regard as major threats to their physical and psychological well being (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

The Sample: Selection and Recruitment

In an attempt to acquire a more in-depth understanding and appreciation for the complexities of sexual assault in the context of the “leaving process,” it is critical to listen to the voices of women as they reveal the contextualized nature of their experiences. The geographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of this and many other rural communities presented obstacles to accessing women to be interviewed through telephone or self-report surveys (DeKeseredy et al., 2008). Like other women living in poor rural communities, many cannot afford telephones or cars (Lewis, 2003). To make matters worse, many rural women have abusive current or former partners who ‘feed off of’ women’s isolation and poverty (Websdale, 1998). Many women living in rural Ohio strongly adhere to privacy norms,\(^{18}\) and have little faith in ‘outsiders,’ (people who are not from the community) (Lewis, 2003). Alternate methods of sample recruitment and data gathering are required to ensure women’s confidentiality, anonymity, and safety due to the reasons mentioned above.

The original Ohio study’s sample was generated through methods influenced by Bowker’s (1983) Milwaukee study. For instance, advertisements for participation in the study were placed in a free newspaper available throughout Athens County, Ohio (the site of the study). Posters about the study were pinned up in public places, such as courthouses, and were given to social service providers who came into contact with women in abusive relationships. Local newspapers, radio and television stations, and Ohio University gave considerable coverage to the project. Social service agencies (i.e. rural shelters, police and Sherriff’s departments, Planned Parenthood, the Sexual Assault Survivor Advocate Program, Hocking College Women’s Center, and the Ohio Domestic Violence Network) and sociologists at Ohio University informed possible respondents about the study. Finally, smaller posters were made available in stores and on sidewalks throughout the county.

\(^{18}\) See Bowker’s (1983) study of woman abuse in Wisconsin.
A total of 43 women were interviewed and public posters attracted most of the respondents (n=27). Eight women were recruited after exposure to media ads or stories regarding the study and the same number were referred by individuals or organizations (n=8). Most of the respondents (n=30) lived in Athens County, three lived in Hocking County, one lived in Vinton County, and nine lived in other rural parts of the state. The mean age of the sample is 35 and the mean income for 2002 was $13,588. Almost all of the women were unemployed but sixty-five percent (n=28) had some type of post-secondary education. Of the 25 women who had been married, all were divorced or legally separated, but only five were remarried. Also, most of the respondents had children.

Data Collection

Women interested in participating in the Ohio study were able to contact two female research assistants, who carried cellular phones twenty-four hours a day to receive calls. After being told the purpose of the study, callers were asked a series of screening questions. The main criteria determining eligibility to be interviewed were being eighteen years of age or older and having ever had any type of unwanted sexual experience when they wanted to end, were trying to end, or after they had ended a relationship with a husband or live-in male partner. Callers were invited to a semi-structured face-to-face interview after meeting the criteria.

Interviewing Procedures

At a time and place of their choosing, each of the 43 women participated in individual, open-ended semi-structured interviews. Most of the interviews were ninety minutes in length and all were tape-recorded. The purpose of the study was disclosed at the beginning of the interviews and informed consent\(^{19}\) and confidentiality was explained. After a few general background questions, the interviews were focused around a series of open-ended questions on the women’s perceptions and experiences of safety (at home and in the community), social networks, unwanted sexual experiences (after being read a broad definition of sexual assault), consequences of the assaults, experiences with social support providers, their own policy recommendations, and their plans for the future. Throughout the interview process, interviewers assured the women they may stop the

\(^{19}\) Please see Appendix II for the Original Ohio Study consent form.
interview at any point if they felt uncomfortable due to the sensitive nature of the topics under discussion. The women who participated were paid $25.00 for their time and compensated up to $7.75 for travel expenses. All of the women were given a list of social support services with phone numbers at the close of the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in an Ohio University office, while six were conducted over the phone and five were held off-campus.

STUDY PART 1: SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL STUDY

Secondary Data Analysis: A Brief Review

Mainly pioneered in North America since the 1990s, a ‘new and emerging methodology’ for conducting free-standing studies in the social sciences has come to the fore (Heaton, 2004). The secondary analysis of pre-existing qualitative data can be defined as “the further analysis of an existing dataset with the aim of addressing a research question distinct from that for which the dataset was originally collected, generating novel interpretations and conclusions” (Hewson, 2006, 274). To date, this methodology has been employed (in most cases) to investigate new and additional research questions rather than to verify the findings of previous studies, involving the use of single, multiple, and mixed qualitative data sets.

Heaton (2004) differentiates between two types of qualitative secondary data analysis: supra and supplementary analysis. In supra analysis, a researcher transcends the terms of the primary study from which the data originated and often involves the exploration of new theoretical, empirical, or methodological questions. Thorne (1994, 1998) has referred to this type of qualitative secondary analysis as ‘armchair induction.’ For example, Bloor and McIntosh (1990) developed an innovative, separate analysis which clearly goes beyond the terms of the original study in their focus on forms of surveillance in professional-client relationships and associated strategies of resistance. Supplementary analysis, on the other hand, is more closely associated to the analytical foci of the primary study in that it extends, rather than exceeds the original research. It entails a more comprehensive focus on an emergent issue or aspect of the data which was not addressed, or was only moderately attended to, by the primary research as a matter of post hoc interest (Heaton, 2004). The aim then of the secondary analysis may shift to a specific theme which the original research was not intended to directly address, but which
emerged nevertheless as pertinent concerns of the secondary researcher. Thorne’s (1994, 1998) ‘retrospective interpretation’ and ‘analytic expansion’ categories are related to supplementary analysis. For example, Kearney and colleagues (1994) found that themes of sexuality and childbearing were central in the interviews conducted in a primary study, although fertility and birth control were not among the primary research questions during data collection. They granted more attention to these themes in their secondary analysis of the original data in order to highlight the centrality of these themes in the women’s life experiences.

For the first part of this study, I employed a qualitative secondary analysis of the original Ohio study. Specifically, I combined both the supra and supplementary types of analyses. My research questions transcend the overall terms of the primary study and the secondary analysis involved the investigation of novel empirical, methodological, and theoretical questions. The original study’s focus was on the overall experiences of rural women who had been sexually assaulted by their male partners during and after separation/divorce. All the women who were interviewed had eventually left or were in the process of leaving their abusive partners at the time of the interviews; however, most women stayed and this ‘process’ of leave-taking lasted from a few weeks to ten years. Many women also went back to their abusive partners many times before the final termination of the relationship and many also described being in more than one abusive relationship. The original interview schedule did not specifically intend to include questions about these women’s experiences while staying in the relationship. In fact, the women’s inclusion in the study was based on the criteria that they were in the process or had already separated from their abusive partners. Nevertheless, many women discussed their experiences of staying and/or returning during their leave-taking process. Staying was so enmeshed in the process of leaving that it proved difficult to discuss them separately. Listening to these women continuously attempt to justify their decisions to stay highlights another important dimension (the exercise of agency through different forms of resistance) that had yet to be explored in the original Ohio study. The original research did, however, highlight the many barriers faced by the women while they were attempting to leave; hence, supplementary analysis is required. In fact, these barriers were referred to by the women as evidence to why they stayed. Therefore, as a matter of
post hoc interest, it was impossible to discuss rural women’s patterns of resistance in
violent relationships without attending to the intersecting oppressions present in their
lives. Accordingly, a more concentrated focus on the many barriers (i.e. criminal-legal
and social support systems, rural patriarchies) faced by the women, as asked in the
original study’s interview schedule, was required.

Epistemological Issues

Data ‘fitness’ in qualitative secondary analysis involves the determination of whether
or not pre-existing qualitative research data can be legitimately used for purposes other
than those for which they were originally collected (Heaton, 2004). To address data
fitness, Thorne (1994) asserts that three factors should be considered. First, the extent of
missing data is important. The screening questions in the original Ohio study excluded
other women’s voices. For instance, Dr. DeKeseredy’s focus on sexual assault neglects
women who do not experience this type of abuse or who may not recognize it as such. If,
as Mahoney & Williams (1998) assert, definitional problems have plagued research on
both partner violence and sexual assault, then we can only imagine the ‘naming’ of abuse
to also be difficult for women themselves (emphasis mine). Because ‘domestic violence’
is often defined, studied, and thought of as separate from sexual assault, it is difficult to
produce statistics on the number of domestic violence situations involving sexual
assaults. Both crimes remain unreported for numerous reasons as previously mentioned,
and many cases that are reported may not be representative as they are comprised of
women seeking assistance or shelter. Many studies report that at least 50 percent and as
many as 70 percent of all battered women seeking help have been sexually assaulted by
their partners, a much larger incidence than found in the general population (20-30
percent) (Mahoney & Williams, 1998). The second criteria for inclusion in the original
Ohio study was that women, in addition to experiencing unwanted sexual experiences,
had to have wanted to end, were trying to end, or have ended a relationship with a
husband or cohabitating male partner. This criterion obviously excluded women who
were involved in violent relationships with female partners. It also excluded the other
groups of women who were not trying to end their relationships, but had stayed with male
partners. This last point exemplifies the bias in the original study’s inclusion criteria that
deserved redress in the secondary analysis.
Second, the lesser the degree of divergence in the aims of the primary and secondary studies, the more likely it is that the data set will itself be sufficient for the latter investigation (Hinds et al., 1997). As addressed in the preceding paragraphs, the original and secondary studies are grounded in similar epistemological and theoretical literatures and the very nature of a supplemental secondary analysis exhibits a smaller degree of divergence. Finally, comparative secondary studies may only be possible where data sets are comprised of similar types of qualitative data that can be subject to the same methods of analysis. In an effort not to treat the original qualitative data as ‘given,’ I re-shaped the data to fit the purposes of the secondary study by selectively limiting the secondary analysis to the themes proposed by my new research questions. The selection of these data is perhaps best described as a form of ‘sorting’ rather than ‘sampling.’ Sampling was the data collection technique used in the original study, while the secondary analysis employed sorting to shift the focus of the analysis and to shape the data so that it fit the purpose of the study.

Another potential epistemological issue with qualitative secondary data analysis is the problem of not having ‘been there’ – how the relatively distant relationship of the secondary researcher to the data affects his or her interpretation of the data (Heaton, 2004). This is not a factor with regards the current study as evidenced in part, by my reflexivity statement and particular involvement with the original study. As a research assistant on the original study, I was not only involved in the preparatory component of the research, but I also remained close to the data by fully transcribing most of the interviews conducted and through my immersion in the original data analysis. Additionally, I was responsible for a large part of the grounded theory methodology through hand coding the transcripts for the purpose of thematic analysis. I also have the advantage of knowledge and experience with the deeper context of the original research (i.e. background knowledge of data site) through my involvement with study. I am from a rural Ohio community and have had experience working with women in shelters across that part of the state. Finally, I have remained in close contact with the Principal Investigator who collected the original data and continue to present findings at national and community conferences and publish in scholarly texts with regards the original Ohio study.
Adapted Grounded Theory

Straus and Corbin (1990) assert that when employing a grounded theory methodology in primary research studies, the choices regarding what data to collect are modified as the study progresses, based on emerging theories derived from the coding and analysis of the data already collected. The thematic codes fit the data rather than forcing data into preconceived codes, allowing for greater accuracy and a clearer rendering of the experiences (Charmaz, 1983). The categories are woven together into a ‘processual’ analysis through which respondents’ experiences can be abstracted and explicated; thus, grounded theory methodology provides the means to develop rich substantive analysis (Lempert, 1996). Because the data in the original Ohio study have already been collected in this way, the idea of ‘theoretical sampling’ seems possibly complicated in qualitative secondary analysis. However, an adapted grounded theoretical methodology can be utilized by “employing theoretical sampling in conjunction with the usual coding procedures,” such as sorting and re-coding (Straus & Corbin, 1990, 189).

As discussed earlier, sorting allows for a researcher to selectively draw upon the particular part of the original data which can form the basis of the secondary study in order to focus the analysis on particular topics or themes. Re-coding involves the removal, revising, or retaining of original data codes depending on their relevance and accuracy (Heaton, 2004). Again, the original Ohio study’s broad theme (rural women’s experiences with separation/divorce sexual assault) was previously identified and coded in the primary analysis but required linking to other codes (i.e. patterns of resistance) for the purposes of the secondary analysis. Still, certain original codes (i.e. socio-demographic characteristics of the women, experiences with barriers, etc.) remained relevant and were retained in the secondary analysis.

I employed this adapted grounded theory method to conceptualize, analyze, and derive theory from the qualitative data obtained from the interviews in the original Ohio study. I began the analysis for this dissertation with the methods of selective sorting and re-coding in which the original data was broken down, examined and compared, and conceptualized and categorized. From this analysis, I made connections between the categories from the overall data set and developed the larger categories to be integrated into core themes (i.e. forms/processes of resistance, definitions/characteristics of
resistance, contributing/constraining factors, intersecting oppressions, and masculinities) in order to answer the research questions set forth in this dissertation.

STUDY PART II: THE BACK-TALK STUDY

Focus Groups: A Brief Review

Focus group interviews originated in the middle of the twentieth century in American advertising and marketing fields and were often employed as a supplement to other methods (i.e. survey construction and/or pilot interviews for larger studies) (Fern, 2001). Focus groups as a distinct methodological tool in and of themselves were not recognized for their value by the social sciences until the 1990s (Vaughn, et. al., 1996). Focus group interviews have been described as an emergent methodology in much feminist research.\(^\text{20}\)

Focus group interviews as a feminist methodology is described by many in the field as consciousness-raising and empowering, more egalitarian, and less exploitative for both the participants and researcher. The participants in focus groups “do not merely describe what is, but participate in shaping what could be” (Montell, 1999, 44). Mies (1983) maintains that feminist focus groups with women assist many women in overcoming structural isolation, with an understanding of the (sometimes) shared nature and social causes of their individual sufferings. By shifting the focus from individual ‘knowers’ to the perspectives of groups, we are able to “move to a more disciplined use of the personal” (DeVault, 1990, 104). Callahan (1983) adds that focus group interviews can provide one of the best methods for a feminist cultural critique in that they facilitate active transformations of consciousness and are empowering because they may provide new information and new knowledges that may enable some women to question oppressive practices.

In moving from “answers” to more of a “conversation,” participants’ responses to and interactions with each other often reveal taken-for-granted categories and beliefs of the researcher, as well as the larger society. Further, discussions stemming from focus groups can provide identification for “local theories and popular knowledge,” while group members may participate in actively generating new knowledge as they attempt to

understand their situation in relation to others (Cancian, 1992, 633). Knowledges and meanings are socially constructed collectively, rather than produced individually, and focus groups by their very nature allow for the revelation of this socially produced knowledge (Montell, 1999). Opie (1990) believes focus groups may significantly contribute to the description and further analyses of social issues that are of great importance to women. The conversations evolving from focus group participants allow for a clarification of ideas and assumptions, while leaving the door open to question and build upon other’s responses. Individuals can ask their own questions, challenge and contradict others and the researcher, and provide personal experiences, collectively creating accounts that prove difficult, if not impossible, to elicit in individual (i.e. one-to-one) interviews (Montell, 1999). Focus group interviews do not completely eliminate the unequal power relations as there is still a researcher who is responsible for initiating or moderating the discussion, as well as selecting the participants to be involved.

As Smith (1987) asserts, the validity of findings should refer not to how well the data represent some larger population, but rather to how well the data describe the particular instances of larger social processes. Thus, focus group recruitment does not represent the general population but does emphasize theoretically-chosen samples that can be expected to provide the best data for the analysis. Participants in focus groups are chosen for their relevant experience, level of self-awareness, and comfort in discussing sensitive issues in the company of others (Morgan, 1988). The consideration of the participant’s needs (i.e. self-revelation of potentially sensitive issues and time commitments) is imperative to effective recruitment for focus groups. Snowball sampling techniques and the recruitment of members of already existing groups (i.e. women’s shelters or support groups) are techniques often used for sample recruitment.

**Back-Talk Focus Groups/Interviews**

An even more ‘recent’ development in qualitative research in the social sciences is the use of back-talk focus groups and interviews.\(^{21}\) This concept, like that of the use of

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\(^{21}\) “Talking back” or “back-talk” as a display of resistance or form of opposition in narrative may not be as “new” as some would think. Talking back has deep roots in African American history, dating back to before slavery (Collins, 2000). It meant “…speaking as equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion” (hooks, 1989, 5). As a form of testimony, talking back meant “to bear witness, to bring forth, to claim and proclaim oneself as an intrinsic part of the world” (Collins, 2000, 2). Therefore, the roots of the concept of “talking back” date back to before the days of
focus groups as an independent methodology, is beginning to take shape as a recognized methodological tool to obtain new and original data. Back-talk focus groups are often used in community-based research where researchers “go back” to the community to present results of their studies in an attempt to get additional feedback from a sample of community members. These researchers often present their findings in order to obtain reactions, additional questions/concerns, and/or suggestions for future research/policy proposals, etc. These discussions of the participants with each other and the researcher generate rich qualitative interactive data that can be used to supplement a previous or ongoing study or as new data to be further analyzed on its own (Wilkinson, 1998). Back-talk focus groups and interviews are empowering to the participants as they provide an opportunity to exercise a greater role in the research process. The researcher can also demonstrate the responsible dissemination of sensitive issues to a potentially diverse and highly politicized audience, which contributes to the creation of a more reflexive and socially responsible research culture (Frisina, 2006).

Back-talk allows for the “participants’ interpretations of the researchers’ interpretations” (Cardano, 1997, 65, cited from Frisina, 2006). Ranci (1998) notes that back-talk is not a validation process but is intended as an investigation of a “second order,” as a means to “meta-communicate” the research (as cited in Frisina, 2006). Voices from the focus groups are added to the researcher’s interpretations as a means to open space for multiple interpretations of social phenomena. In back-talk interviews, the researcher discusses critically their research with the participants, thereby creating new data and potentially creating new questions and opportunities for further research. Back-talk provides the researcher the opportunity to be responsible (professionally and socially) for their research by considering the implications and consequences of their interpretations in regards to the everyday life and social world of the people they interview. Frisina (2006) declares that back-talk focus groups and interviews are imperative to challenge dominant interpretative frameworks and to open symbolic spaces for social change.

slavery, yet the use (and validation) of talking back as a participatory action component in focus groups in social scientific qualitative research is fairly new.
Research Design and Participants: Gathering Original Research through Back-Talk

The secondary analysis of the original Ohio study allowed for the construction of core themes (i.e. forms/processes of resistance, definitions/characteristics of resistance, contributing/constraining factors, intersecting oppressions, and masculinities) in order to answer the research questions set forth in my dissertation. In addition to this analysis, I coordinated back-talk focus interviews in an effort to: a) collect supplementary data to update older existing data (i.e. the data collected from the Ohio study ten years prior) because time has passed; b) to investigate how place matters in an effort to add an analysis of ‘place’ to the current intersectionalities paradigm; and c) to provide a safe space for women (similar to the women interviewed in the original Ohio study) to “talk back” to my secondary analysis. Thus, the addition of back-talk focus groups and interviews not only provided me the opportunity to conduct new research in the fields of violence against women, rural and public sociology, and feminist methodologies, but also allowed me to “give back” to the women whose voices have been marginalized in the academic and social world.

Broad Operational Definitions

I used the same operational definitions in the back-talk study as were used in the original Ohio study and have re-quoted them here.

Not restricted to functional proximity, separation and divorce were defined as physically, legally, or emotionally exiting a marital or cohabitating relationship.

Because sexual assault takes on a variety of shapes and forms, like the physical and psychological abuses of women, the definition employed in this study is not restricted to forced penetration. The types of sexual assault experienced by the women interviewed in the study are classified as: sexual contact: sex play (i.e. fondling, kissing, or petting) arising from menacing verbal pressure, misuse of authority, threats of harm, or actual physical force; sexual coercion: unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of menacing verbal pressure or the misuse of authority; attempted rape: attempted unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of or threats of force, or the use of drugs or

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22 Please see Appendices IV and V for University of Hawaii at Manoa and Muskingum University CHS approval of this study.
23 Emotionally exiting a relationship is defined as women’s denial or restriction of sexual relations and other intimate exchanges (DeKeseredy, 2007).
alcohol, and *rape*: unwanted sexual intercourse arising from the use of or threats of force and other unwanted sex acts (i.e. anal or oral intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) arising from the use of or threat of force, or the use of drugs or alcohol.

The term *rural* is often restricted to a narrow definition that denotes a small population size or living in the countryside. In addition to this small population size and/or density, rural communities are described as those where people know each other’s business, come into regular contact with each other, and share a larger core of values than is true of people in urban areas (Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999).

**The Preparatory Phase**

The preparatory phase employed in the original Ohio study also guided the formation and construction of the back-talk focus groups and interviews. The geographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of this and many other rural communities present obstacles to accessing women to be interviewed through telephone or self-report surveys. Alternate methods of sample recruitment and data gathering were required to ensure women’s confidentiality, anonymity, and safety due to the reasons mentioned above.

I recruited a sample of 12 women through methods similar to the original Ohio study as influenced by Bowker’s (1983) Milwaukee study. I continued ongoing contact with a group of leading researchers in the field (including the PI of the original Ohio study), local shelter staff, sexual assault survivor advocates, police officers, and mental health workers in rural southeastern Ohio who referred women (n=4) who participated in the interviews. I also had the opportunity to conduct a back talk focus group with all seven staff members of the local women’s shelter in the county of the study site. I placed posters and flyers about the focus groups in public places, such as courthouses, post offices, and supermarkets, and gave them to social service providers who came into contact with women in abusive relationships. I approached various social service agencies (i.e. rural shelters, police and Sherriff’s departments, the county Health Department and the local Job and Family Services) and faculty and staff at Muskingum University asking for their assistance in informing possible respondents about the focus groups. I also created posters and a flyer with contact information and displayed these in campus buildings and restrooms. Finally, I spoke about the research study in all of my

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24 Please see Appendix VI for the Back-Talk Study Recruitment Flyer.
face-to-face- and online classes and sent recruitment emails\textsuperscript{25} to my former students in the Sociology, Psychology, and Criminal Justice departments at Muskingum University.

The Sample: Selection and Recruitment

I employed purposive sampling to allow for the recruitment and selection of participants who could provide information of central importance to my analysis. Therefore, I believe it was necessary to recruit women as similar as possible to those who were selected for the original Ohio study. The main criteria determining eligibility to be interviewed (in the Ohio study) were being eighteen years of age or older and having ever had \textit{any} type of unwanted sexual experience when they wanted to end, were trying to end, or after they had ended a relationship with a husband or live-in male partner. Towards the end of my data collection process, I amended the eligibility criteria to allow for women who may have not had unwanted \textit{sexual} experiences and/or women who were \textit{not} trying to leave their relationships (or who may still even be in relationships where they are experiencing abuse).

A total of 12 women were interviewed and most were recruited by calls for participation emails I sent to former students (n=4). Three women were recruited after exposure to on-campus flyers (n=3) and one women called to participate after exposure to a flyer she saw in her local grocery store (n=1). Referrals from employees from the local women’s shelter attracted two of the respondents and the same number were referred by friends (n=2). Most of the respondents (n=7) lived in Guernsey County, two lived in Muskingum County, and three lived in other rural parts of the state. All twelve women indicated that they have lived in their current county of residence for more than half of their individual lives. The mean age of the sample is 34.5. All twelve of the women were employed: six were employed full-time, two part-time, and one held two part-time jobs. Three women were students who also held part-time jobs. Most women were employed in the areas of child care (n=3) or teaching (n=3). Most of the women interviewed were educated with three holding Associate’s degrees, five with Bachelor’s degrees, two with Master’s degrees and two with high school diplomas. All twelve women indicated that they had either been married or had lived with abusive male partners of whom their experiences with violence were about. Most women were either currently married,

\textsuperscript{25} Please see Appendix VII for the Back-Talk Study Email Recruitment Request.
engaged, or cohabiting with romantic partners (n=7), while four remained single and one woman was widowed. Two women openly acknowledged they were lesbian and both lived with their female partners. Most of the respondents had children (n=8). Most of the women identified themselves as white (n=7) and two women identified as African American. Most women identified as Christian (n=9), specifically identifying as Methodist (n=2), Baptist (n=2), Catholic (n=1), and Quaker (n=1).

**Data Collection**

Women interested in participating in my study were able to contact me via two phone numbers (a local office phone number and a cell phone) and my email address. After being told the purpose of the study, callers were asked if they were comfortable in participating in a focus group or a personal individual interview. If respondents indicated they were willing to meet with the group, they were encouraged to provide their availability and were asked to get back into contact with me by a certain date, at which time I had scheduled one meeting date and time for the focus group. If respondents indicated they preferred to be interviewed privately, I set up individual meeting dates, times, and places that were convenient to their personal schedules. I held the focus group and interviews at sites and times that were convenient and comfortable for the participants. I discussed the logistics of this aspect of the research with the director of the local women’s shelter who provided a better insight and offered a site for the interviews to be held. After a coordinated date and time was scheduled, four women participated in a back-talk focus group in a conference room at Muskingum University. A focus group of seven employees of a local women’s shelter in the county of the study site was conducted in the large conference room of the Administrative offices of the shelter. At a time and place of their choosing, eight women participated in individual, open-ended semi-structured interviews. Most of the individual interviews were conducted in a conference room at the local women’s shelter (n=4), while three were held in my Muskingum University office and one was conducted in the participant’s home at their request. Most of the focus groups and interviews were ninety minutes in length and all were audio-recorded.
Interviewing Procedures

I verified the safety and comfort of each individual before the interviews began. The purpose of the study was disclosed at the beginning of the interviews and informed consent and confidentiality was explained. I provided all participants with a written informed consent,\textsuperscript{26} which I also read aloud at the beginning of the interviews. I then obtained both verbal and written permission to audiotape the discussions for transcription and analysis. I asked all participants if they had any questions I could answer before we proceeded but none did. Throughout the interview process, I assured the women they may stop the interview at any point or refuse to answer or expand on any question if they felt uncomfortable due to the sensitive nature of the topics under discussion, but none did. We did however, take small breaks throughout most of the interviews for the women to re-group, wipe tears, and take some deep breaths before proceeding with the interview. It is critical to point out the breadth and depth of the interviews for the talk-back study as the shortest interview was over an hour in length and the longest interviewed spanned almost four hours. The women who participated were unpaid for their time, but were provided light snacks and water, tea, coffee, and lots of tissues.

After a few general background questions, the interviews were focused around a series of open-ended back-talk questions geared toward verifying, dissenting with, or adding a differing perspective to women’s responses given in the Ohio study conducted ten years ago\textsuperscript{27}. These questions were about women’s perceptions and experiences of safety (at home and in the community), social networks, unwanted sexual experiences (after being read a broad definition of sexual assault), consequences of the assaults, experiences with social support providers, and their own policy recommendations. Next, the women were asked a series of new questions about differences between rural and urban men and women, the meaning of victim/survivor and strength, what was missing from the research and what I should focus research on next, their goals and plans for the future. The interviews concluded with the participants’ questions for the researcher. All of the women were given copies of the informed consent form and a card with contact information for social support services at the close of the interview.

\textsuperscript{26} Please see Appendix VIII for the Back-Talk Study Consent Form.
\textsuperscript{27} Please see Appendix IX for the Back-Talk Study Interview Schedule.
CHAPTER IV
SURVIVING RURAL REALITIES IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS:
SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS FINDINGS

In addition to the limited theoretical contributions, research on the topic of the decision-making processes of poor rural women experiencing separation/divorce sexual assault is also lacking (Baker, 1997; Gagne, 1992). There is an increasing amount of literature beginning to highlight the factors that limit or constrain women’s agency in abusive relationships, but most research focuses on leave-taking decisions (see Bowker, 1983; Harris, 1988; Harris & Dewdney, 1994; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Wuest, 1999; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999). There are very few studies dedicated to women’s decisions to stay. To add, most of the limited work on separation/divorce sexual assault, regardless of the focus, has been conducted in urban areas. Further, research and theory is lacking on how the decision-making processes for poor rural women are further constrained by rural patriarchal ideologies.

Thus, the main objective of this inquiry was to fill this void by presenting the results of a secondary data analysis of the rural Ohio study. The qualitative nature of this study provided an alternative approach to exploring the decision-making processes of rural women in the context of separation/divorce by capturing the contextualized nature of their experiences (Ungar, 2004). Finally, this analysis highlights the relevance of the social construction of agency, the survivor theory, and radical feminist perspectives of rural patriarchy in research with rural violence survivors. The following questions guided the secondary analysis: How do rural women exercise agency within the context of separation/divorce sexual assault? What factors limit or constrain their decision-making processes?

The data from the rural Ohio study were collected from a small non-random sample, so they cannot be generalized to the entire rural Ohio population. Still, as the products of exploratory research, the findings presented in the Ohio study strongly suggested that separation/divorce sexual assault is a major social problem in rural parts of the state. Moreover, this study documented a number of challenges facing the women who live there, which is the current theme of investigation in this secondary analysis. It is important to note that the original study’s focus was on the experiences of women who
had been sexually assaulted by their male partners during and after separation and/or divorce. All women who were interviewed had eventually left or were in the process of leaving their abusive partners at the time of the interviews; however, some women stayed. The length of time they stayed after the abuse had occurred varied from a few weeks to ten years. Many women also went back to their abusive partners many times before the final termination of the relationship and many also described being in more than one abusive relationship. Although the original interview schedule did not specifically intend to include questions about their experiences while staying in the relationship, many women discussed this reality in their interviews. Staying was so enmeshed in the process of leaving that it proved difficult to discuss them separately. In fact, the many barriers they faced while attempting to leave were used as evidence to why they stayed. Listening to these women continuously attempt to justify their decisions to stay highlighted another important dimension of this study that had yet to be explored in the previous research on this topic. The multitude of internal and external barriers facing rural women that made it more challenging for them to leave their abusive relationships were common themes that emerged from the interviews. The four main themes discussed in this chapter include failure of the criminal-legal system, the failure of social support systems, rural realities of everyday living, and the strategy of staying to ‘keep the peace’ in the home, with a final discussion on staying strong.

FAILURE OF THE CRIMINAL-LEGAL SYSTEM

Many women interviewed in the original Ohio study turned to the criminal-legal system when attempting to leave their abusive situations. Only one of the women who turned to the criminal-legal system for help stated it was the best assistance she received. Needless to say, however, most other women’s experiences with police and the legal/judicial system were disconcerting.

*Experiences with Police*

Many women explained that police officers or members of the Sherriff’s departments failed to recognize and understand the complexities facing rural women in abusive relationships. For instance, Alexa turned to the police for help and they just tried to convince her to press charges against her husband:
I was scared to death of him and I wasn’t going to do that…I was scared to death that he was going to go do a few years in jail and then come back out and hunt me down. There was no way that I would ever have pressed charges.

By failing to attend to the multidimensional context of abusive situations, many women described being “managed” in a very distant, unsympathetic way by police. Women have to prove that they were worthy of help and assistance (Lempert, 1997). They are most often given two options: leave or file charges, both of which can be extremely dangerous to women experiencing violence in their relationships.

Research demonstrates that police departments in general have lagged behind in training their officers and the attitudes of individual officers typically mirror those held by the public (Barnett, 2000). Particularly in rural America, there is a tendency to normalize violence against women. Many researchers have found that numerous rural legal officials contribute to a form of collective efficacy that protects and/or encourages woman abuse.28 Similar to Websdale’s (1998) findings among rural Kentucky women, many of the rural Ohio women in this study expressed their concern about a powerful “ol’ boys network” that serves to dominate and oppress women. Tina had a particularly challenging situation because her husband is “a corrections officer in the town that I lived in and he’s friends with the sheriff and whoever else…Pretty much political [connections].” Even if the women’s abusive intimate partners were not directly affiliated with the criminal-legal system, most women still experienced this ol’ boy’s network. Shelly declared:

I wasn’t believed. When I said yes there’s drugs, yes there’s guns, yes there’s been violence, there’s abuse, there’s a history of abuse, he’s threatened to abuse my daughters, he’s beating my children; I wasn’t believed.

Women described that blaming women, not believing their stories, and minimizing their abuse were common practices employed by police that serve to normalize and legitimate violence against women. Maggie wished that the Sheriff’s Department would have been more understanding to her situation:

Well it would be nice, well out here we deal with the Sheriff’s Department outside the city limits. It would be nice if the deputy’s would stop rolling their

eyeballs. You know it’s uh I don’t think they treat domestic fights with enough seriousness…

Norrine also had several encounters with police who minimized the violence she was encountering at home:

Well actually yea, I’ve had to call the cops a few times…you know if a call is made and the police show up and they have this attitude of you know “here we go again.” You know another domestic you know, “we come in here and we separate you and you’re just going to go back together.” You know, “it’s a waste of my time.”

In the end, many women, like Gina, just stopped looking for help from the police:

And I told the police that there was a gun in the house and I figured that that would be enough, they had my permission to go in and you know everything. And all they did was tell my husband and his friend, “Well why don’t you go spend the night somewhere else. Wait till she cools off.” And that was the help I got. So there I was and he came back the next day and it started all over again. So there, the help that you think is there isn’t there. And when you find out the help you think is there isn’t there, you stop trying.

Of the women who came into contact with the police or Sherriff’s departments, many also encountered problems with the criminal legal/judicial system.

Experiences with the Legal/Judicial System

Research shows that without exception, even the most assaultive men are rarely sanctioned by the court (Barnett, 2000). Judges’ lack of training is cited by most empirical studies and experts’ analyses as a serious problem in the court, if not the most serious flaw within the criminal justice system (Epstein, 1999). This lack of education and training concerning sexual assault and domestic violence extends to all members of the legal system as well. Non-prosecution for domestic assault cases and discrimination or confusion about legal policies was an area of concern for women in this study.

Sometimes, like in Leslie’s case, the abuser even uses this “knowledge” to his advantage:

And I remember him saying when he was hitting my face, “bitch, if I’m going to jail, I’m gonna go for the right reasons.” You know, “if you put my ass in prison I’m gonna go, I’m gonna do it right.” So he’s looking at 8 years, so he did it right.

Some women described experiencing problems with the prosecutorial policies of the criminal-legal system, such as confusion inherent in the policies or total lack of prosecution, like in Maggie’s situation. Maggie told her partner before he left for boot camp that she intended to prosecute him for rape:
And he looked at me and said, that no one would ever believe a fucking slut, a single mother of two and, if I did, that he would kill me and take my child away from me. So, that kind of shut me up for a couple of days until I found out that he was joining the military. Then, I went to an attorney and asked them for advice and everything. And the attorney told me that since he was leaving for boot camp in three days, there was no way they could prosecute him because he was now under military jurisdiction. I just had to deal with it.

Barnett (2000) asserts that the major problem in the legal system is not the need for new laws but the failure of the criminal-legal system to implement the existing laws appropriately. However, Carol may disagree, as she attempted to file charges against her ex-partner:

The unwanted sexual experiences usually came after the domestic violence so it was like all in one basically…To me it’s violence. Sexual assault is violence. Yea but it is treated two different things…And he ended up in the beginning having three felony charges and now he’s only got one. It was all combined. So that’s the lesser crime, the sexual assault which it should be just as big you know being hurt, violently hurt, it’s a crime.

Carol’s experience highlights the critical need for the legal system to attend to the multitude of violence taking place in women’s lives by not minimizing certain forms of violence. In Carol’s experience, the legal system minimized the sexual assault by combining it with the domestic violence charge. This attention in the criminal-legal system is also lacking when it comes to enforcement of civil protection orders.

Orders of Protection

An Order of Protection is a civil court order from a judicial officer intended to provide protection from physical harm caused by force from a family or household member (Barnett, 2000). Domestic violence protection orders often force batterers to vacate the family residence; however, the primary function is to protect victims from physical abuse, harassment, and threats. Not all women in abusive situations turn to protection orders because they fear retaliation by the batterer, courtroom rituals that tend to blame the victim, and that they will be disbelieved (Ptacek, 1999). Many women believed protection orders would not be effective in reducing their abuse, as was the case in Vivian’s experience:

That’s another thing they have these stupid restraining orders. They’re, they’re senseless. I’ve had restraining orders against him. And so you call the police and say that he’s there or he’s been coming around and then he lies and says he wasn’t
or he has friends who stick up for him and say he was here, this and that, you know. And you know so it’s just, unless they catch him right on your property you know, its worthless, restraining orders are.

Serina shares her overall dissatisfaction with the concept of restraining orders:

You can have your civil protection orders, your restraining orders, but in the end it’s a fricken’ piece of paper. If the police department, the sheriff’s department, and the court system doesn’t back that law up, then what’s the point of having it?

For those women who did file orders of protection, some experienced an unintended consequence. Just as dual arrest policies\(^{29}\) result in serious hardships for battered women (i.e. denial of shelter access to arrested women); dual orders of protection have similar effects. Leslie described the day she went to file charges against her abuser:

He was charged with persistent disorderly. And the courts, I have a civil protection order against me, so the next three or four years, I’ve only had it since last summer, so the next four years of my life is going to be screwed up. I can’t be a foster parent like I want to be.

Charlotte also has a civil order of protection placed against her by her abuser and confronted yet another member of the system who did not believe her:

He has a civil protection order against me…Yes, and I have one against him. And she [the prosecutor] turned around and gave him one because she felt bad for him, that she didn’t think that it all happened the way it did.

The primary concern of these women was to seek help from a criminal-legal system supposedly set up to ‘protect and serve,’ but that ultimately failed to ensure their safety and security. Gondolff & Fisher (1988) point out that women trying to leave abusive relationships exhibit a ‘drive to survive’ but many have ‘fallen through the cracks.’ Unfortunately, this is true for those women who turned to various social support systems for help during the process of leaving abusive partners.

FAILURE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Most of the women in this study cited failure of social support systems as a main factor in their decisions to stay in their abusive relationships. The types of social support most often discussed were friends and family and both public and private agencies,

\(^{29}\) Dual arrest, or the arrest of two individuals, is sometimes mandated in certain jurisdictions for domestic violence crimes. Oftentimes, women arrested as a result of dual-arrest mandates have been previously victimized in domestic violence incidents (Martin, 1997) and suffer further detrimental consequences (i.e. having an arrest record, possibility of losing their jobs, housing, and children, etc.).
women’s groups, shelters, and programs (i.e. Victim’s Assistance). The women shared their struggles about the inaccessibility or ineptness of social services, nonintervention from neighbors and friends, and general difficulties with transportation and financial hardships in rural living. Nearly half of the women interviewed did seek out social support services, but found them to be inaccessible or inept at understanding the complexities of their situations.

Social Support Service Invisibility

The visibility and availability of social service agencies in this area was a huge concern for many rural Ohio women. Twenty-five percent (n=11) of the women interviewed stated they virtually had next to no contact with anyone. Ulrich’s (1991) interviews with 51 urban and rural women highlighted that leaving was a process that occurred over time. Of the women who did attempt to seek out help from social support services, many, like Kylee, found themselves stuck at a dead end after a long emotional journey towards the end of her relationship:

Where is that safe place where women can just go and hide for five seconds? And I look in the phone book under women, under therapist, under everything and there’s nothing! I mean I think maybe I’m not looking in the right places but…and here it took me this long emotionally to get to the point to where I’m like maybe I do need a little bit of help but you can’t find it, you can’t find it…

For most of the women, like Kylee, it took a long time to come to a realization that they had to leave and when they were finally ready, they were unable to find the help they were looking for. Jill suggested that help be more accessible to survivors because:

When you have to go out of your routine to get help, it’s noticeable to the abuser you know… I mean you know you go to your bank, you go to the store, you go to your job, you go to your church. You know you should be able to use those avenues and let people know on the side you know, “this is happening, could you help me.” You know and it isn’t, it isn’t that way right now.

In this context, the process of leaving involves complex decision-making, risk-taking, and requires women’s use of active resistance (Wuest, 1999). When women do find the courage and strength and are aware of where to go to find help, they sometimes end up at another dead end. Mary did finally break away from her abusive partner long enough to go to Victim’s Assistance but:
They said they couldn’t help me because the bruises on my arms were fading. So, you know, Athens basically didn’t leave me any recourse. Nobody wanted to help me. What am I supposed to do, stick in a situation until I’m dead…?

Although her bruises from the physical abuse were fading, Mary, like 74 percent (n=32) of the women interviewed, was also sexually assaulted when she expressed a desire to leave her relationship. Many women simultaneously experience two or more variants of violence in their relationships (DeKeseredy et al., 2005). In addition to sexual assault, 84 percent (n=36) of women interviewed in this study experienced physical abuse and 88 percent (n=38) experienced psychological or emotional abuse at the hands of their current or former intimate partners. Mary and many others looked to their friends and family for assistance but to no avail.

**Nonintervention from Neighbors and Friends**

Eighty-four percent (n=36) of the women in this study stated that they could not count on their neighbors to help them with their personal problems. June explains:

> Back then you never really talked about things like that with other women. So I really don’t know. I didn’t share. I kept everything a secret. I didn’t want anybody to know what was going on. You know you try to keep everything painted pretty and you know we lived in a sub-division, where the only thing that separated your house was a driveway. So, uh, you didn’t talk a lot about your personal affairs to your neighbors.

Browning (2002) refers to this as adherence and enforcement of “nonintervention norms.” Laura explains, “Because people don’t want to get involved or they don’t want to see that. And if you walk around with black and blue marks under your eyes, nobody wants to see that and then they just judge you.” When talking with Susan about her willingness to ask her neighbors or friends for a ride, she stated:

> I couldn’t count on them for a ride or to help me in my situation. I found my own way. You know ‘cause it seemed like a lot of them [friends] were having the same problems that I was.

These women were all involved in a continuing struggle to maintain their own safety and well-being and did not have the time or energy to help others in need. In fact, 81 percent (n=35) of the women stated that they personally know other women who were sexually assaulted. Liz is one woman who knew “a lot” of her neighbors were also experiencing frequent forms of male-to-female victimization:
See those, I see my neighbors and my friends just keep going on in relationships or where the they sexually abuse you know ...they give them black eyes, men get physically abusive with em. And I says, “Why do you put up with this?” “Well because they ...we have to have a man. And we have to have a man to help us raise our children.”

In other cases, like Lea’s, the abuser became an expert in victim-blaming and getting friend’s and neighbors to hitch a ride on his bandwagon:

I’d be screaming and he would literally put his hands over my mouth because he didn’t want his neighbors to know that we were either arguing or fighting and uh he got his neighbors believing that it was me, all my fault.

As a result, many women come to internalize fault and participate in their own self-blame, hiding their secret and closing the door to potential intervention from the community. Amy recalls:

I felt like my personal problems were not their problems and that it was almost my fault that I had let it get to this point that I wasn’t strong enough then and had let it get to this point. And also he has a way of making an ass, he flips out, he say so many mean things. He’ll say things that aren’t true. And I felt like since I just moved into that community I didn’t want people to know...

As highlighted through the experiences of these survivors, rural women face numerous obstacles with social support systems when trying to end their abusive relationships. Most women’s efforts to maintain employment and possible rejection from formal and informal social support systems are compounded by transportation and financial difficulties and hardships with single motherhood in the rural reality of everyday life.

RURAL REALITIES

Women living in rural areas are faced with the over-arching ideologies of rural patriarchy (Websdale, 1998), translating into rural social norms that guide beliefs and behaviors that are deemed ‘acceptable,’ especially in the home. Typically characterized by a rigid gendered division of labor, men were the primary “bread winners” and women had “an intense and highly privatized relationship with domestic production,” such as childrearing and doing housework (DeKeseredy 2007; Fassinger and Schwarzweller 1984; Websdale 1998, p. 49). Mary remembers: “He didn’t allow me to socialize at all. My place was at home with the children and that’s where I was most of...
the time.” And Alexis adds: “His favorite thing was, ‘if you are not going to be at work, you’re going to be here cooking and cleaning, doing laundry. And if I ever catch you sitting on your ass, I am going to beat the fuck out of you,’ you know.” Oftentimes strapped for cash and without a car, many women interviewed in this study lived this rural reality daily amidst the ever-present rural social norms.

**Rural Social Norms**

*Marriage is forever. You take the good with the bad and learn to live with it.* Several women were “raised” to believe in the absolute sanctity of marriage, regardless of whether it was good or bad. Jackie explained her decision to stay with her abuser:

…my mom and dad’s been married for 53 years and uh, she, I mean, even though, there has been some tough times on her side of the relationship with my dad, that uh, she still stuck it out and that is what she wanted me to do in relation to sticking it out with my husband verses taking the children and raising them on my own.

Leaving a marital relationship goes against prevailing rural social norms and leaves survivors open to public censure (Websdale, 1995b). Women who leave face stigmatization from their families, neighbors, and friends who adhere to an ideology of rural patriarchy. Several studies have found this ideology functions to prevent women from leaving their abusive situations. The widespread acceptance of violence against women and rural community norms prohibit some women from publicly talking about their experiences and from seeking social support (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Krishnan, Hilbert, & Pace, 2001; Lewis, 2003). Becky talked about how she came to internalize these powerful rural social norms:

Uh well I wanted to but I was afraid to go I wanted to leave. But I wanted …part of me wanted to leave and part of me said no because women shouldn’t raise [children] by themselves so it’s and then he left and I I sat there and thought well I’m going to try and make this work.

Like Becky, many women conformed to rural social norms of not abandoning their marriages, even if abuse was rampant. These rural social norms were compounded by many unique transportation and financial difficulties in a rural setting.

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Transportation/Financial Difficulties of Rural Life

Many women discussed their lack of transportation or lack of funding for transportation that prevented them from seeking the assistance they needed. For instance, Mary stated “and I haven’t been able to go back there [Victim’s Assistance] since, seeing as how I am strapped for transportation, it makes life a little more difficult.” When faced with this obstacle and the general decline of available jobs in the area, Dee was unable to leave the county in an attempt to escape her abuser:

There’s not a lot of jobs here. Without a car I’m kind of dead. It’s really hard without a car. I sold it because it was to the point where I could get more by selling it, I, there just was no way to fix it. So, um…I don’t think there’s any help in this county for someone in my situation. And without help, I don’t know how I’m going to be able to get out of the county.

For women trying to escape abuse at home, any slight difference in their normalized everyday routine may become noticed by the abuser, thereby increasing the risks of leaving. In fact, the women interviewed in Websdale’s (1998) study explained that their abusers would often use tactics, such as destroying their current or ex-wives’ cars, which prove to be much needed in rural areas due to the lack of transportation. For instance, Anna described the difficulty in reaching out for help while trying to end her relationship:

And here I, I called like the ‘Care Line’ numerous times. And it was like he knew. Every time I had an appointment something would happen; my car would disappear. So I could never make it to my appointments. …. “You need to take him [their son]; I can’t take time away from work. Can you take him to the doctor” even though it was planned for him to take one of the kids to the doctor, or whatever. It was like he knew. He had to know.

Financial difficulties prevent many rural women from coming into contact with those who may help them. Unemployment or underemployment was a serious issue facing many, as the women interviewed had a mean income of $13,588 for 2002. Many rural women “suffer in silence” because they are unable to afford telephones or cars (Pizzey, 1974). In numerous cases, being economically disadvantaged is not simply the result of the inability to find work in a community plagued by joblessness, but separation/divorce abuse itself contributes directly to women’s economic disadvantage (Davis, 1999). Picture Linda’s experience after she tried to leave her partner:

He…actually tried to ruin me prior to us splitting up. He forged my signature on a document to the amount of the car loan. He had someone else come in, because he
knew the dealer. So, I was put on there as co-owner without my knowledge and he stopped making payments, which really hurt my credit bad…So, financially I have nothing now. And he stole $13,000 from some bank accounts for my kids’ college.

So in the end, many women like Carla, stay for financial support:

And um but the reason why I ended up staying with this guy and years later marrying him was because I was just so financially, you know I was making a lousy seven bucks an hour and trying to make it on my own. I was scared not to have him there and and supporting and helping feed us and pay the bills.

In addition to the transportation and financial barriers faced by rural women in general, there is a particular hardship placed on single mothers who are trying to exit abusive relationships.

Financial Strain of Single Motherhood

There are devastating financial consequences for women with children who are separating from abusive relationships. Single mothers are more likely to have incomes below poverty levels (34%) compared to single fathers (16%) and compared to other family structures (Fields & Casper, 2001). “I am a single parent, I have three children, so, um, that is primary my biggest concern where am I going to live. Because the job economy is really bad here.” Many women, like Susan, shared their struggles with finding employment, affordable housing and childcare. In fact, 70 percent (n=30) of the women faced at least one form of economic abuse.31 Decisions to stay in abusive situations were based, in part, on their financial dependence on the abuser. Brie highlighted her take on the wage discrimination existing between men and women in our society that restricts her options to leave with her children:

…but the men are always the ones that make more money than the women. Nine times out of ten. I could probably do the same job as half the men in this world and not make anything. But, nobody is willing to help a woman. I don’t understand that. I don’t understand. Maybe if it was the other way around it would be different. But it’s not. Somebody’s, something’s gotta give here. ‘Cause it’s not fair.

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31 Economic abuse is a type of abuse commonly occurring domestic violence relationships that is characterized by obstacles created by the batterer to prevent women from achieving economic security through controlling and limiting their access to financial resources, controlling the household earnings, and/or interfering with or preventing education, job training, or the ability to find or keep a job (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, Accessed October 14, 2008, http://www.ncadv.org.)
In fact, in 2004, shortly after the findings of this study were first published, women's wages were 76.5% of men's wages (DeNavas-Walt et al, 2005). This statistic fails to include the struggles of working moms with their “double day” duties of work and taking care of the children after work.

Other women were struggling in minimum-wage jobs but the cost of child-care proved too high to leave their abuser. Maggie stated that it wasn’t because “he was really financially taking care of us” but he provided the childcare while she could go to work:

…but how am I gonna go to work? The reason I stayed is because he disciplined my kids. Yes he was a little rough but there was a person there at home with my kids and I took the abuse but when the abuse began to be forced on them, that’s when a mom has to say “that’s enough.”

Carrie’s situation adds another important dimension to consider. She had been suffering with repeated urinary tract infections and ovarian cysts (caused by the repeated rape by her husband) that required monthly doctor’s visits. She remained in the relationship so that she and her children would be covered on her husband’s health insurance. Carrie sums it up:

If you don’t have your health it’s basically your greatest asset, if you don’t have that, what am I gonna give to my kids, who’s gonna take care of them?

Most women interviewed expressed their frustration with the “myth of child support.” One half or less than one half of single-mother families received limited or no child support while only a minority of awardees actually collect the full amount of support (Meyer, 1999). Take Mia’s situation for example:

I don’t think it’s fair…I don’t, and it seems like every woman that’s ever been in this situation always gets the short end of the stick. Always. You know, we’re left to pay for everything. We don’t receive child support, if we do have our kids. We don’t get the help.

For many rural women like Mia, the realities of being unemployed or under-employed, facing the rising costs of child-care and the lack of child support and the need for health insurance were issues that became of secondary importance in the midst of protecting their children at all costs.
Lea is one of many mothers interviewed who explained additional difficulties in the process of leaving with children. Keeping their children safe amidst fears of further physical and emotional abuse and potential financial ruin seem to be the most central concerns of mothers experiencing abuse at home. Eisikovits and Buchbinder (1999) remind us that we need to recognize the primacy of women’s experiences arising from participation in their everyday world. The top priority of the mothers interviewed in this study was keeping their children safe from potential or further physical and/or emotional abuse from their male partners. Laura discussed her leaving process as a constant challenge to ensure the safety of her children:

I can get over it but they’re, they’re kids you know. And they should not have to live their life you know in a house where they, I have to keep the doors locked, I’m afraid to let ‘em go out now and I hate this for ‘em you know, but what am I supposed to do to keep ‘em safe? I have to keep them safe.

Keeping the doors locked and a watchful eye on their children is a constant protection method used by the many women whose experience with other social support or criminal-legal agencies have failed them. Sometimes, as in Mary’s situation, the children have to also learn to employ these techniques themselves:

My 12-year-old for the last three, well since we have split up, has put the couch in front of the door and that’s where he sleeps every single night. He said that way, if he can stop him in any way until I can get to a phone or get out of the house, he’ll do it.

In addition to protecting themselves and their children from their abuser, many women also fear their children will be removed by child protective services if they disclose their victimization (Barnett, 2001). These women were faced with a daily dilemma: they cannot protect their children unless they are protected but if they ask for protection, their children may be removed. Structural constraints leave a woman no alternative but to define herself through her mothering (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988) as being a ‘good’ mother (trying to protect her children) means admitting to being ‘bad’ (to being battered). Many women’s decisions to stay in their current abusive situation seem more understandable because they are faced with a system that holds mothers accountable for
failing to protect their children from abuse by their partner. In addition to the rural and practical realities discussed previously, many women with children stay in abusive relationships and attempt to keep the peace as leaving sometimes poses a greater threat to survival.

**KEEPING THE PEACE**

Many women interviewed had turned to at least one type of support in the process of leaving. They began weighing their options: continue to struggle with failing systems and other obstacles (as previously discussed) or “stick it out.” Beth, who lived through on-going physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, discussed the amount of strength required to “give in or give the men what they want in order to keep peace in the home not necessarily because (you) want it.” The women in Davis’ (2002) study exhibited an ‘inner resource’ of strength that enabled them to terminate abusive relationships, but it also enabled them to stay when leaving might have posed a greater threat to their survival and their children’s. Davis (2002) describes “strength” as an attribute developed in the process of learning to survive which involves developing a plan of escape or safety net for survival. There is great determination and immense will power in making plans to leave abusive relationships, but first, women must learn to survive within the context of staying.

*Learning to Survive*

All of the survivors interviewed had experienced sexual assault from an intimate partner at some point in their leaving process. Again, an overwhelming majority of these women said they were sexually assaulted when they simply expressed a desire to leave and most were also experiencing physical and psychological violence. It is an understatement to say that fear was a persistent reality in the women’s everyday lives and not reacting to the abuse enabled some to survive. Jill acknowledged, “I would go ahead and just do what they asked because of the fear of getting hurt, you know, physically worse than if I would have um fought it.” Becky tearfully recalled her reluctance to leave Mike:

> When you’re in the kind of situation that I was in, I know I lived in like, (crying) eggshells, ya know. I was a mess. Still am, but not as much as one. But you don’t know, I mean, you’re just like, it’s like you’re always like, ya know, you wanna, you don’t want to piss this person off because god only knows what’s going to
happen. How, what’s going to be the wrath, ya know. The wrath of Mike, in my instance… You, you, you get just so beat down. People don’t understand how low you are.

Lisa acknowledges, “… and you want your family to be okay but he’s beating you so if you have sex with him and maybe he’ll stop beating me and you think everything will be okay.” Lisa’s survival strategy adds an important dimension to the context of staying. As Lempert (1997) suggests, women’s survival depends on continued and creative use of whatever personal powers they possess, even if it was only the power to remain in the relationship. Women experiencing multiple forms of violence are constantly negotiating the threat of the situation. One form of violence is tolerated to moderate the effects of another (i.e. in Lisa’s case, she “submitted” to the sexual abuse to prevent the physical abuse) and this, along with other very real fears, plays an integral role into women’s decision-making processes.

**Very Real Fears**

Fear of the unknown – be it fear of life without marriage, fear of institutional victimization, or fear of further victimization by the abuser – may also delay a woman’s escape from violence within the home (Stanko, 1988). Mary discussed her fears in the process of leaving:

It’s a very hard decision. It’s very scary. That um it’s easier to stay some place that’s familiar even though it’s painful because you don’t know what’s on the other side.

Mary described her ex-husband as a “pretty dangerous guy” whom she “wasn’t going to mess with.” Mary suffered years of emotional, physical, sexual and financial abuse at the hands of her ex. She was forced to drop out of school because she was pregnant and had to work. The police had been to her house “a dozen times” but never “did anything to him.” She had seen her fair share of courtrooms, but “nothing worked” until one day she left. “And that was it.”

Kelly describes her relationship as “bad from the start” but “familiar.” Like many women, it took Kelly “at least 10 times” to finally leave her abusive partner for good. She describes her fear of the unknown:

And (I) got away from it for a long time, but I just I just kept going back. Even when I was doing so well and had my own place and got everything together, it
was just. I guess there’s an old saying you know that says people are funny sometime, they just can’t wait to get hurt again. And it just seemed like I was constantly taking him back even when I didn’t need him in my life. He was there for so many years and and he was really all I knew….And at the time to get in a healthy relationship, I wouldn’t know what that was like. That would scare me to death.

It seems prudent to reiterate the very real fact that threads through this research:
Separation has been found to be a key risk factor in femicide in many Canadian and U.S. studies, but it is also a major determinant in non-lethal violence against women (Sev’er, 2002; Gartner, Dawson & Crawford, 2001; Wilson & Daly, 1994; Hardesty, 2002, Fleury et al., 2000; Arendell, 1995; and Bachman & Saltzman, 1995). To say that fear of further victimization is prominent in the lives of women in abusive relationships who may be trying to separate is a critical understatement. Jessie explains:

He, he beat the hell out of me quite a few times um to stop me from leaving just in one of his drunken rages. Um actually the very last time he was trying to take sex and I fought back and I fought back and uh I ended up with 2 black eyes, broken nose, busted lip, um hand, bruises around my throat…. Sometimes I’d just lay there and let him do it to get it done and over with.

Vicky adds:

…it in other incidences where I have been raped or felt a threat, I would go ahead and just do what they asked because of the fear of getting hurt you know physically worse than if I would have um fought it.

Renee had been in three different abusive relationships – all of which involved physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. She was with her most recent ex-husband for eight years, and had been separated for “a year and three months” when she was interviewed. Renee described society as “three monkeys – don’t see, don’t hear, don’t speak” when it comes to responding to the multitude of violences perpetrated against women. Renee’s ex-husband was constantly reminding her that “I’ll find you I’ll kill you, if you leave me.” It took her three years to finally “build up the courage enough to split and go.” Renee recalled her plan of escape:

I know that it’s easier said than done, but you’re going to have to sit down and think it through. You know. Okay today’s Monday, he goes to work at 3 o’clock Friday, as soon as he’s headed out the door going to work, you’re going to pack the essentials that you need and you’re going to get out. And then you’re going to go seek someone that’s going to help you. If that is going to the crisis center,
saying hey look I’m homeless now. I mean even if it takes you down the shelter route, that’s what you need to do. Because eventually you’re going to end up dead one way or another. It’s going to happen.

Keeping the peace by staying in the abusive relationship until a safety plan of escape can be set in motion represents a rational option in these women’s arsenal of survival strategies. Once the decision-making process becomes contextualized, the demonstrations of strength and resiliency of these survivors is apparent and their decisions to stay make sense.

SUMMARY: STAYING STRONG

After years of repeated sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, Renee left her abuser:

I never got anywhere with him and I’m, I’m, I don’t know. Then one day I just decided I’d had enough. Me and my son deserve better. That's when I left.

After years of repeated sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, Mary left her abuser:

…I did a turn around and it made me stronger to the point where I knew that regardless what I did, I had to get away from him. Regardless how sorry I felt for him in relation to, um, our home and our children, from his existence, his presence, that type of thing. But, I knew that, you know, that feeling sorry for him was no longer was an aspect of it. I just packed up and left.

After years of repeated sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, Karla left her abuser:

And until I learned to love, myself and to expect something more then that was the only kind of relationship I was going to be able to have. And that was the only kind of love, the only kind of sex I was gonna get because that was the only kind I understood.

Renee, Mary, Karla and the numerous other women interviewed for this study have exhibited, what Davis (2002) would refer to as “resiliency” in their processes of leave-taking. Resilience, described as another inner resource, is the ability to succeed in the face of adversity (Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen 2000) and results from a person’s ability to make meaning out of stressful events (Christopher 2000). Staying in these contexts highlights the basis of Gondolf and Fisher’s (1988) survivor theory, contradicting the learned helplessness and Stockholm syndrome concepts often applied to women who stay in abusive relationships. These concepts view ‘staying’ as the women’s denial or minimization of abuse, but the women in this study prove otherwise.
The findings in this chapter suggest that the women in this study exercised agency differently than the type of agency that researchers have suggested in the past, within the context of their individual, situational, and historical realities. These women experienced a multitude of internal and external obstacles at the individual and structural levels that shaped their choice and constraint in their decisions to stay in abusive relationships. The main finding presented in this chapter is that many women’s decision not to leave their abusive relationships is entirely rational when contextualized. The failures of the criminal-legal and social support systems and hardships with children sometimes leave women with no other choice than to learn to survive while staying in these violent situations.

This research contributes to the emerging qualitative literature on rural women’s decision-making constraints in the context of separating/leaving/returning to/staying in abusive relationships. If we continue to focus our research on why women do not leave instead of exploring the many barriers that deny women assistance with this process, the on-going demonstrations of agency and strength among these and other women in abusive situations will continue to be overlooked and underappreciated in research and in our social institutions.

Most working in these social service arenas do have a genuine desire to provide help, but also face barriers resulting mainly from cutbacks. For instance, the Athens County Department of Jobs and Family Services had a nine million dollar budget cut in 2001, the year before the interviews in this study took place (Evans, 2002). To add, the only women’s shelter in Athens received $17, 800 less in funding and the crisis hotline has been “scaled back considerably” due to the requirements for local service agencies to match the rising Medicaid costs in Ohio (Claussen, 2003). This lack of governmental and state funding for formal social support services in rural counties leads to the overall concern with women and children living in poverty. The lack of jobs, access to education, and the rising costs of childcare further burden rural women, especially single mothers who are attempting to leave abusive relationships. This is the harsh reality that many rural women live in on a daily basis as they learn to survive while making the rational decision to stay in their violent relationships. The question is not why did these women return or stay but rather what are the interventions and services that failed these
women. The question then becomes focused on how we can improve policies, procedures and services to meet the needs of women experiencing violence in their relationships so that women, like Laura, will have accessible options:

I probably sound like one of those divorced women that says all the bad things about her husband, but in this case there’s a lot a lot of bad. And I, I feel bad because it makes me sound like I was participating in that life style or I approved of it or I didn’t try hard enough, or you know that I didn’t care about my kids, none of that’s true. I feel humiliated for having been there all those years but I, I didn’t want to be. I just didn’t know what to do.

*We cannot talk about women leaving or staying in abusive situations without understanding those situations from the view of the women.* If we fail to account for women’s own perspectives of their experiences with abuse, we will continue to face assistance built on theory, ideology, and/or prior conceptualizations that are not consonant with women’s lived experiences (Lempert, 1997). Further, it is critical to take into consideration the multidimensionality of women’s lives. As Walker et al. (2004) asserts: women in different cultures may define abuse differently, experience different norms about relationships and relationship separation, have different patterns of help seeking, and have different barriers to service seeking that may contribute to differences in the context of victimization as well as in the context of separation. It now becomes imperative to focus on women’s contextualized decision-making processes, specifically the decisions to stay, with a consideration of the social, economic, and criminal-legal obstacles they confront in the process.

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32 Quote observed in Ulrich (1993, p.387).
CHAPTER V

TALKING MATTERS: THE BACK-TALK FINDINGS

“Talking back” or “back-talk” as a display of resistance or form of opposition in narrative may not be as “new” as some would think. Talking back has deep roots in African American history, dating back to before slavery (Collins, 2000). It meant “…speaking as equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion” (hooks, 1989, 5). As a form of testimony, talking back meant “to bear witness, to bring forth, to claim and proclaim oneself as an intrinsic part of the world” (Collins, 2000, 2). Therefore, the roots of the concept of “talking back” date back to before the days of slavery, yet the use (and validation) of talking back as a participatory action component in focus groups in social scientific qualitative research is fairly new. As mentioned in Chapter Three, back-talk focus groups/interviews are often used in community-based research where researchers “go back” to the community to present results of their studies in an attempt to get additional feedback from a sample of community members. In back-talk interviews, the researcher discusses critically their research with the participants, often presenting their findings in order to obtain reactions and additional questions/concerns. Voices from the interviews are added to the researcher’s interpretations as a means to open space for multiple interpretations of social phenomena, thereby creating new data and potentially creating new questions and opportunities for further research (Wilkinson, 1998). Frisina (2006) declares that back-talk focus groups and interviews are imperative to challenge dominant interpretative frameworks and to open symbolic spaces for social change. From the original study’s analysis, I centered my back-talk questions on three primary areas: characteristics of men who abuse and the influence of their male peers, rural community attributes, and women’s experiences with seeking formal sources of social support and three key themes from my secondary analysis: 1) women’s conceptions of abuse and victimization, with a focus on conceptualizations of sexual assault, 2) negotiations with staying, and 3) conceptualizations of strength and survival in abusive relationships.

This chapter presents back-talk group reactions to the findings from the original Ohio study of over a decade ago. Through the passage of time, a different demographic of twelve women provided both similar and different perspectives to the findings of the
original study as well as to the themes of the secondary data analysis conducted of the original study. The most important underlying finding is that talking matters in many important ways. Talking-back, talking through, and talking about women’s experiences with the multiple forms of violence in the context of their own lived realities truly mattered and continues to matter. Talking with women then and now uncovered their individual, but also shared constructions of the meanings given to the multitude of violence they experienced in the course of their abusive relationships. Naming and defining their experiences and talking through them allowed them to construct themselves and others in the context of their own shared, yet unique social location.

WHAT TIME TELLS – WOMEN TALK BACK TO THE ORIGINAL STUDY’S FINDINGS

Findings from the original Ohio study conducted almost a decade ago suggest that separation/divorce sexual assault was a major problem in rural Ohio communities (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2009). Most women in that study, as well as the overwhelming majority of the women I spoke with as part of the back-talk study not only perceived domestic violence and sexual assault as major problems in their communities, but also personally knew other women, including themselves, who had been at the receiving end of this type of violence. Like the women interviewed ten years ago, the new cohort of women related to the stories about the behaviors exhibited by the partners who were abusive towards them, with many similarities in terms of male peer support factors (i.e. frequent drinking with friends, attachments to male peers who also abuse their intimate partners, and consumption of pornography) and yet a few distinct differences with regards to their partners’ adherence to traditional patriarchal ideologies. The 12 women I recently interviewed in the back-talk study confirmed the findings from the previous study in regards to the difficulty in speaking of the abuse due to various attributes of their rural communities such as perceptions of safety due to a community tolerance for woman abuse and the elevated status of hunting (with the attendant availability of and access to weapons) and the presence of rural non-intervention norms that further increased their isolation. Finally, what differentiated the new study most from the original Ohio study was the fact that only 25 percent (n = 3) of the women I spoke with actually sought out formal services as a result of the abuse in their
relationships and one of those women was somewhat forced to seek formal help due to the nature of the injuries she sustained while attempting to leave her abusive relationship. Like the women in the original study, many women I spoke with in the back-talk study did agree that the strong presence of an *ol boys’* network and attendant isolation were two major factors in preventing them from seeking formal services. The two women who did utilize formal social support providers, like those who received formal assistance in the original Ohio study, experienced both positive and negative outcomes, but in the end, they all agreed that talking with someone who listened first, believed their truth, and continued to support them truly mattered.

**THE MEN WHO ABUSE AND THEIR BAND OF BROTHERS**

Recall that male peer support has been defined as “attachments to male peers and the resources they provide which encourage and legitimate woman abuse” (DeKeseredy, 1990, 130). The original Ohio study was one of the first of its kind to qualitatively investigate the nature and content of pro-abuse male social networks as it contributes to separation/divorce sexual assault in rural U.S. communities. Sixty-seven percent of the women in the original Ohio study reported on a variety of ways in which their partner’s male peers perpetuated and legitimated separation/divorce sexual assault. Frequently drinking with male friends, providing informational support and having an attachment to abusive peers were three methods in which male peer support was experienced. Informational support refers to the guidance and advice that influences men to sexually, physically, and psychologically abuse their female partners and attachment to abusive peers is defined as having male friends who also abuse women (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009). Male peer support proved a constant theme among the women’s stories told ten years ago, as well as in the experiences shared by the twelve women I recently spoke with, with a few distinct differences.

*Male Bonding*

Some researchers have found that alcohol consumption is considerably higher among men in rural areas when compared to larger, more urban cities (Carrington, 2007; Weisheit, Wells, and Falcone, 2006); thus, pub or bar culture influences the construction of rural masculinities (Campbell and Bell, 2000). Frequent drinking with male friends has been linked to the development of a type of masculinity that serves to objectify
women, endorsing male behavior that may lead to physical and sexual violence against women (Campbell, 2000; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005). Like the women in the original Ohio study, a large majority (88%) of the women in the new back-talk group said their former (and sometimes current) partners frequently drank alcohol or did drugs with their male peers. Whether they believed alcohol directly influenced their abusive partners’ behaviors or not, consuming alcohol with male peers seemed common practice in this rural area. Gina recalls the normality of her husband’s drinking with friends:

Yeah, that was a lot, he had his group of friends, you know, everything involved a case of beer, you know that was fine when I was drinking too because I was, but the older I got, you know getting pregnant and stuff, you know come on? But that was just normal. All of them would drink. All of them would drink while they went hunting. All of them would drink while they went fishing, you know, be out in the garage workin’ on stuff, drink. It was normal for that whole group to do that.

Hope adds:

He, he drank and did drugs with his friends when he dropped out of high school and he did acid and I think he may have tried cocaine three or four times…He had a brother that did cocaine…um he liked to get high A LOT, I mean he smoked pot, he had pot in the house…

Terri talked with me about coming home (to the house she paid for solely) after a long day at school and then night at work to find her boyfriend of two years partying “again” with friends:

There’s beer bottles. There's whiskey bottles. There’s um razor blades on my table, well, it was like a bar and I'm like, you know, maybe the beer, maybe the whiskey. I can see the whiskey but what the hell, razor blades, you know, I'm not stupid, you know?

The story of how this night ended became a familiar one for Terry. After she kicked all of his friends out of her house, she was verbally, physically, and sexually abused by her boyfriend and spent the next few hours trying to “piece everything back together” all just to “do it again the next weekend.”

Attachment to abusive male peers was also found to be an important component to male peer support that contributes to separation/divorce sexual assault. When stating that many women (47%) interviewed a decade ago said that their partners had male friends who physically and/or sexually assaulted the women they were romantically involved
with, a few women in the back-talk group totally agreed, while most said they just weren’t sure. Catie recalls: “No. Well, I don’t know. I know one of them did.” She went on to tell about the time when her fiancé and his best friend left her and his friend’s girlfriend at home (in a very rural town in a neighboring state) with no car or phone. This is what happened when they finally arrived back at the house after being at the bar for six hours:

His buddy had started arguing with his girlfriend over her sleeping around. I don’t know what was going on, anything and everything he brought it up and he was yellin’ at her and he actually smashed her on top of the head with a pop can and let it spill out all over her…Like I had no idea what the fight was over and I was like ‘I am not jumping in the middle, you are not putting me in the middle of this, you’re not.’ And so him and I got into an argument over that because I wasn’t he wasn’t putting me in the middle of it….he accused me of spittin’ in his face… So he pushed me and I was like ‘that’s it, I’m done.’ And I got up and was walkin’ to the bedroom…and I was like ‘I ain’t puttin’ up with this no more, I’m leavin’ and you can have your friend and all your drugs and all your alcohol and anything you want’… So I was walkin across the kitchen and he always wore steel-toed boots. Um he worked stagehand every now and then and so a lot of the work and stuff he did he always wore steel-toed boots and he kicked me across my knees with steel-toed boots on and I went parallel with the ground and face planted. And I got back up and him and I continued to argue and I went around the corner into the bedroom to start packin’ my things and he snatched me up by my throat and picked me up off the ground again and his friend held a locked 9mm with a bullet in the chamber to my head.

Needless to say, the situation eventually dissipated and Catie eventually left that night but the abusive relationship continued for another nine months before it finally ended for good. Frequent drinking and attachment to abusive male peers was a significant indicator of the influence of male peer support to women’s experiences of violence in their relationships both then and now. Men’s adherence to the ideology of familial (as well as societal) patriarchy also proved significant, regardless of time passed.

*A Man’s Man Wears the Pants*

The role of patriarchal dominance and control, also a dominant theme in the marital rape literature (Bergen & Barnhill, 2006), is central to a discussion of male peer support. This ideology serves to support violence against women who are perceived as violating the ideals of male power and male control over women in intimate relationships (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1993; Smith, 1990), insisting on women’s respect, loyalty, obedience, sexual access and fidelity, and dependency (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998b;
Nearly 80% of the women interviewed in the original Ohio study stated that they believed their partners felt they should be in charge at home. Like this majority, some women in the back-talk study, like Angie, echoed this sentiment. Angie describes her ex-husband as “a traditional man’s man” who most assuredly proscribed to the position of male dominance in the home: “He just...his supper had to be waitin… Ready for him when he come home. And if it wasn't, I would pay for it.” Leslie also was married to a man who “wore the pants in the family.” I asked her to describe how these pants fit:

Cause it was like, you know, even though I worked too, he always put in, ‘well I make more money than you, you know, I pay the bills.’ It didn’t matter you know, he’d tell me, ‘if you want something go buy it.’ Well I can’t because you’ve already spent all the money on everything you want, and then when we got low on money it was always my fault: ‘well you should make more money.’ And then when I got laid off a month after I came back from maternity leave so it was like, you know, trying to do the contract work, you know, trying to do that while at home with a new baby, you know, and then he’d throw that in my face, ‘well I have to carry the insurance on us now’ and you know, I, it was like, it was like nothing I did was good enough, you know? When I graduated with my Associates degree, I had also worked at this school and some of the teachers who taught me got me balloons and flowers and I brought them home before I went to my evening class. And when I got home, the vase was smashed in the sink. ‘Who bought you flowers? You being a whore?’ It’s like ‘the teachers got me flowers, I worked there!’ And you know I tried to have a little get together because no one else was going to do it. I was happy I graduated and he showed up to that late and drunk and I got a plate thrown at my head so it was like, nothing I ever did was good enough.

Although half of the women I spoke with in the talk-back study agreed that their male partners also prescribed to the ideology of familial patriarchy, half of the women didn’t characterize their partners in that respect, which was a very interesting finding that differentiates the women in the two studies. Some women, like Amy, said their partners didn’t hate women and didn’t mind them working and one even described her partner as being ‘for’ women’s rights:

I always thought that was kind of strange that he was all for me working and going back to school but then he would turn around and beat me for it. Maybe he was open to other women’s rights and just not mine?
Stephanie adds:

It wasn’t that he demanded things to be traditional in the home as far as our roles were concerned. I mean, he did do some of the traditional ‘women’s work’ like making dinner and doing laundry. And he didn’t mind me working and going to school. At least he didn’t seem to care. But I guess he just was really controlling in other ways.

Even though their partners may not have ever said that they believed in male power and control over women in the public and private spheres, their actions spoke louder than their words, as evidenced throughout the ways in which the women would narrate their stories of love, jealousy, control, and violence. Many of these women may have had difficulty in distinguishing their partner’s patriarchal beliefs because it ‘seemed’ as if they were tearing down those assumptions by working and furthering their education. Even with the role-reversal in the private sphere, it seemed men in these rural communities were still finding ways to re-assert patriarchal control in their homes.

The ideology of patriarchy promotes male proprietoriness, or the “tendency [of some men] to think of women as sexual and reproductive ‘property’ they can own and exchange” (Wilson & Daly, 1992, 85), referring to not only the “emotional force of [the man’s] own feelings of entitlement but to a more pervasive attitude [one of control and ownership] toward social relationships [especially with intimate female partners]” (Wilson & Daly, 1992, 95). Jealousy and the perception of infidelity were discussed by women in the original and back-talk groups as major precipitating factors leading to the violence experienced in these women’s lives. Tina recalls the very first time her husband “got physical” with her, an incident that happened nearly 40 years ago:

Yeah I do. It was after one of those nights at the dance place and uh….he was shooting pool and I think some guy come over from outta town and asked me to dance and I told him no and he saw it and he come over and picked me up by my throat and said, ‘Who in the hell do you think you’re talkin’ to?’ And I said ‘I didn’t do anything, he came over and talked to me’ and of course everybody just stands around and watches ya. Um, or the barmaid would say, ‘take it outside.’ Well if we took it outside, you know I was gonna see the pavement so that was the first time. He took me by the neck inside and said ‘we’re gettin’ the hell outta here.’ He drove about 90 miles all the way home and uh drug me outta the car, literally by feet and uh just started slappin’ me. Of course I slapped back. I had to fight back and uh I just, you just finally give up, you know, you just get away and you sit outside and you hope that he passes out, which he usually did.
Tina’s husband gave her an “allowance” and controlled all the finances. She describes a very “traditional” division of labor in the home, with him rarely tending to the housework or their two children. Although she has worked outside of the home for the past 25 years, Tina asserts that it is still “his” money, like she is “his” wife who is expected to do “his” laundry and make “his” dinner every night.

Debbie also described an incident (after she had discovered her husband had been unfaithful in their marriage) in which her husband forced her to have sex and felt completely justified because she was “his” wife:

I remember one time, when he acted so completely different. So completely different that that I did try to get away from him and it was rough and it was, ‘you’re gonna do this because you’re my wife! And you said that we were back together again.’ I think… Because I didn’t want to get hurt. Because I knew if I started a fight with him then, it would’ve gotten ugly. Um, and I felt terrible. I felt like he didn’t think it was me. I don’t know if this other person that he was with was rough and tough or what but it was, oh my God, I just wish this was over, you know. I just don’t want, I just don’t want this. And uh it went on and on and finally he just, it was over. And I remember going outside on the deck and cryin and cryin and just felt, I felt filthy and it was my husband. I felt filthy and it was just like, God! And I threw up and I got sick and I screamed and I think I went in and drank a half a bottle of Southern Comfort, which I did, you know and I felt horrible. Just dirty.

The interesting point of departure with regards to this particular inquiry about patriarchal control concerns the different demographic of women interviewed in the back-talk group as compared to the women interviewed in the original Ohio study. While only half of the women interviewed a decade ago in the original study were employed and a little more had reported having some post-secondary education, all of the women in the back-talk group were employed (six were full-time, two were part-time, one held two part-time jobs, and three were full-time students with part-time jobs) and all but two had earned advanced degrees (two held MAs, five held BAs, three held AAs, and two completed HS). Also, a majority of the men discussed by the women in the original study were employed or described as the sole providers, while most of the women’s partners in the new back-talk study were unemployed or underemployed at the time of the interview, yet most still described their male partners as holding patriarchal beliefs and attitudes in the relationship. So regardless of the education or employment status of either the men or women, the ideology of familial and societal patriarchy still proved
significant. This finding points to the idea that employment may not only be a socioeconomic resource, but also a symbolic factor (Connell, 1995; MacMillan and Gartner, 1999; Thoits, 1992), especially in the construction of masculinities in rural areas, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. For most of these women, staying in a patriarchal relationship proved “the thing you do” because it’s “what’s expected” from their families, friends, and communities. In addition to holding onto the ideology of familial patriarchy through means that served to justify male proprietariness, many women I spoke with described the influence of pornography as it related to male peer support.

Pornography: A Training Manual for Abuse

Many feminists argue that pornography is strongly associated with various forms of woman abuse (Bergen & Bogle, 2000; Jensen, 2007) and a few studies have found that pornography is related to male peer support (DeKeseredy & Schwartz 1998b; Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1998). Through exposure to pornographic films and magazines, some men learn to sexually objectify women (R. Jensen, 1995), thus using it as a “training manual for abuse” (Bergen & Boyle, 2000, 231). In fact, 65% of the women interviewed in the original Ohio study indicated that their male partners viewed pornographic material and 30% of those women believed it contributed directly to their abuse. Although I did not specifically ask about the influence of pornography, it was a recurring topic mentioned by some women in the back-talk group when discussing the association with male peers. Dana talked about her sexually abusive experiences, even though she did not deem them as such, and the influence of pornography: “He always had a fantasy of doing a threesome and talked me into it… [Porn was] a big factor. He wasn’t always interested in sex with me per se, it seemed like it was always others.” Evelyn apologized for “going off on a tangent” about this subject, but what she described was totally relevant to the discussion about the association of pornography to violence against women. When I asked if her husband (of 10 years) watched porn, she begins:

Not very much. His parents did. He, he would get really mad when somebody had porn on. Not always, every once in a while, he would sit and watch it, but after a while, he would get sick of it and walk out. His parents, when he was little, would go to porn drive-ins with the kids in the back of the station wagon and would sit and watch and make out with the kids in the car! When his mom got divorced, she remarried somebody she worked with and he was a very abusive alcoholic and he
would come home and want to have sex with her. And my husband tells me about one day he hid under the couch real quick because um he didn't want to get beat up and they ended up having sex on the couch and he had to work really hard to stay quiet under the couch until it was over with. I mean it was just horrible. Some of the stuff, I mean it gets worse than that. I mean it was really bad.

Evelyn went on to describe the dynamics with her and her husband and the defining moment in their relationship:

There was a defining moment in our, it was after we got married that um, changed I think, changed everything. I had heard somewhere and told my husband to see what he thought about it that um, men like to rape women and got satisfaction out of that. And I think within the week, he tried, just calling me names, and being forceful and he, I didn't enjoy it at all and I told him so and he did enjoy it and decided to continue… I think he thought that I was just playing along at first but then he went to some level that I didn't, he wasn't, um, but he seemed to think it was okay, he had. We were married; I left twice, separated from him twice to go, more to try to get him to stop then to really leave…

She continued discussing the verbal, physical, and sexual assaults that began within a few months after her marriage:

Um, forceful, nasty, demeaning. I wouldn’t say particularly violent, except that he would pin me down and wouldn't let me get up and he, he was, he had taken a martial arts classes and could anticipate every move I made before I moved and… It was just horrible… like sex would go on and on and on and he couldn't get off until I was uncomfortable and after reading everything I got the this idea that he can't get off unless I'm uncomfortable and it progressed through the marriage to where it wasn't just being uncomfortable, it has to be worse than that. He had to, he, he didn't hit me that often, he did hit me though during the marriage but not like during sex he didn't smack me around and stuff, um, but he would call me just really foul names and try to make me feel as horrible about myself as I could in the bedroom. It was always a sex thing. You had to feel bad about yourself during sex and you know, until I was screaming at him, ‘get off of me!’ Cussing at him, you know, fighting with him and then he would get off. So one day I decided, you know, I'm going to test this. I'm going to start right at the beginning and see if it works and and it did. He got off before he even got his pants down because I started the fighting even before he got me in the bed and and it worked and I knew, I knew that he was sick and this was never going to end.

After divorcing her husband, Evelyn has been in therapy for the last five years and expressed that she attributes his behavior to a wide combination of his abusive past (which included the presence of pornography at a young age) and his addictive personality (which also includes a combination of drug abuse, pornography, and a
“questionable” group of male friends and family). As shown by the original study and confirmed by the back-talk findings, pornography (as a factor contributing to male peer support) does play a role in separation and divorce sexual assault. In addition to the similar characteristics of men who are abusive in their intimate relationships and the company they keep, many women I spoke with in the back-talk study reported a very similar experience regarding the rural communities in which they lived and it is important to note that these community attributes seemed constant with regard to space and time.

RURAL COMMUNITY ATTRIBUTES

The realities of rural life (i.e. lack of access to or availability of formal social support services and resources, fear of using those resources, financial instability, geographic isolation, transportations issues, and lack of job/education opportunities) plays a huge role in women’s stay-leave decision-making processes and limits their options in abusive relationships (Fagen, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Logan and Walker, 2004; Riddell et al., 2009; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2009). Other rural community attributes such as women’s perceptions of safety in their homes and communities, which is colored by the general acceptance of woman abuse as well as the importance of hunting (which inevitably involves the availability of and access to firearms), and the presence of rural non-intervention norms impact women’s ability to seek out informal means of social support and have a huge influence on women’s stay-leave decision-making processes (Browning, 2002; DeKeseredy and Joseph, 2006; Krishnan et al., 2001; Lewis, 2003; Logan et al., 2004, 2005; Annan, 2011).

Perceptions of Safety

When 43 rural Ohio women were asked a decade ago how safe they generally feel at home and in their communities, over 80% stated that unwanted sex, rape, and sexual assault were a major problem in their community. Seventy-five percent of the women I spoke with in the back-talk study agreed, with a majority adding that they thought domestic violence in general was a serious problem in the towns they lived in. My conversation with Tina shed light on this perception:

Tina: Um, I would say in the last few years it’s become a major problem around here. Just because of the events that have happened lately that’s more out. Used to be it was swept under the rug but now it’s being more and more coming out in media, um,
MS: the events as in?
Tina: we recently had a woman that was raped and burnt, set on fire, and she eventually died, was close to town here, um, we’ve held several domestics, you know, involving even young pregnant women. Um, I’ve even gotten harassed late at night washing my car. It’s just, you know, it’s scary.
MS: more so in the last five-ten years than in…
Tina: I would say probably in the last 10 years, yeah.

When I asked Tina what she thinks accounts for that change, she replied:

I think it’s happening more. I think it’s both. I think the media’s not afraid to um put it out there for us to hear. Like a lot of the, a lot of the groups that support um abuse are more or less kind of making them, making the stand and having it you know, spoken about. I think a lot of it has to do with um the unemployment and um economy you know, about more people having to go back to work, stress on families, things of that nature, um. And I think, I see a lot of the generation of um the younger ones, as in the 18 to 25 group being more aggressive and you hear a lot more about it…in their dating relationships, you know a lot of people’s married that you hear of and these domestics, you know, it seems like there’s more and more young people uh out there that these things happen to.

Jill thought the influence of alcohol on women’s vulnerability also played a key role in the prevalence of sexual assault in her community:

Um, I agree, to a point depending on how vulnerable the women are. Like, I know a lot of women who go out to bars and drink too much and then you know, I mean. Me not so much now, I’m a home body but when I look back at when I was 20, 21, and things, you know, that happened to me that could have been prevented, had I not been so under the influence of alcohol…I think drinking and drugs are a big issue in my community, which I think leaves women vulnerable to that.

A large majority (over 80%) of women in the original Ohio study believed there was an acceptance of abuse in their community. A decade later, all of the women I talked with in the back-talk study whole-heartedly agreed, most citing that what happens “behind closed doors” (private life) stays hidden from view (public life) because it becomes “just part of everyday life” in their “smaller, old school communities.” Nicole discussed her experience with her live-in male partner of six years:

I think that people just kind-of look at it like we are an old school community. You close your doors, you put your smile on and you go about your day…This is just how it is, yea. It’s just that they accepted it, it’s just like they’ve seen it. They’ve seen it so much and it was just a part of their everyday, their everyday life…Yea I had a softball size bruise on my arm from where he hit me for no reason, I didn’t even do anything, I was just, I was just looking at my phone and
he came outta nowhere and he hit me and I was standing there doing the
dishes…and she [his mother] would say, ‘how’d you get that bruise on your arm?’
And I’m like, ‘your son hit me!’ That was right before I left.

I asked Nicole if her boyfriend’s mother seemed shocked by her response and she
resounded, “No, not really,” adding that she had also been abused by her husband (her
boyfriend’s father), who was an alcoholic. Stacy also noted the tendency for people to
“see but not see” the abuse, also pointing to the influence of alcohol:

Um, I just, I mean, it is accepted, um especially here…it just something that kind
of happens and a lot of times its overlooked in these smaller communities um, or
you know, women hide it, you know, dads, husbands go out and get drunk and
come home and they, you know beat their wives, beat their kids and it’s all okay
the next day because now he's sorry, he's sober…There was a point when his
brother was living with me where um that I had to I was like screaming for him to
come get my boyfriend off of me, you know and he did. And I left the house that
night, you know. So it’s not like they didn’t see it. But they didn’t want to see it.
You know?

Like Stacy and Nicole, Gina talked about her husband’s friends and family, as well as her
own, witnessing the abuse but “minding their own” and not intervening: “There were
times when his friends or family were at the house and saw it and they just turned their
heads, you know.” When I asked Gina why she thought this happened, her response
highlighted the common “excuses and justifications” often provided for men’s bad
behavior:

I don’t really know…I don’t know if it’s just they still feel like male dominance
and they should be able to do whatever they want to their wives or girlfriends or
whatever or if that’s how they grew up and that’s what they saw and they feel that
that’s just normal. Or like with him, it was just accepting ‘oh he’s got a bad
temper, oh he drinks too much…it would be ok.’ They would pat him on the back
and tell him it would be ok, while I am hyperventilating in the bedroom and it’s
like, ‘get over it, it will be ok tomorrow.’

Susan echoed Gina’s experience when recalling how her and her husband’s mutual
friends would essentially turn the other cheek to his abusive behavior, chalk ing it up to a
normal night out:

I couldn’t really depend on my friends. There was none of them that would even
stand up to him because they knew how he was when he got drunk…I just didn’t
think they wanted to get involved. Yeah, they don’t want to be in the middle, they
knew it was going to happen. But that didn’t stop us from all going out. It was just
like, it was like, ‘oh that’s just the way it is. This is what’s gonna happen.’
More than half of the women interviewed in the original Ohio study stated they did not feel safe at home, with many citing the availability and access to guns (mainly for hunting) as a primary reason. Every woman I talked to over a decade later agreed that hunting still was extremely important to men in their communities, regardless of whether their partners were hunters. The notion of “bars and fields” rang out as a popular phrase in which the women labeled hunting in their communities as “the thing to do.” Amy states, “I don’t know if it’s just a guy thing or it’s just lack of things for them to do, other than that.” As other researchers have found, besides the fact that actual gun ownership tends to be higher in rural areas, the passion with which owning a gun is defended as a human rights issue stands out as a symbol of what it means to be a man in rural places (Hogg and Carrington, 2006; Wendt, 2009). Regardless of whether women believed the presence of guns in their homes directly influenced their decision-making processes, many women did grant credence to the notion that hunting was not only common practice in their rural communities, but was a right to be defended by men. Julie explained:

It was like all he did. When he wasn’t working, he was hunting. He hunted everything from deer, to quail, to rabbits and it seemed like everything was always in season. It just seemed like so much more than a hobby. He would get together with his buddies and they would just sit around and talk about the hunt, the guns, the ‘sport’ of it. It was like that was the only way he could be a real man.

Heather talked a lot about how her community embraced and promoted the sport of hunting and the right to bear arms:

Oh yeah! It’s a big thing, especially in our community, there’s a Deerassic Park, which is a big outdoors, environmental…They promote the hunting and the guns and you know, they have the big um, I don’t know if you call it a festival, a fundraising thing for the park, and actually it’s somewhat of a good thing because it’s for the state park here, but then again, they give away the guns, they promote the four-wheeling, the hunting on the four wheelers, um, they give away cars. It’s big ticket, lots of prizes, and most of the high dollar prizes is the guns.

I asked Heather if this affected how she perceived her own safety because there is such a huge influence of hunting in her community:

I say, I think that in the back of your mind, you’re aware of what’s around you. I would say probably three out of five, if you would interview three out of five boys or you hear of, they have hunting experience or they think they can hunt. And I don’t know if these ones can hunt as well as what my father used to hunt. You
know, it was a sport, it wasn’t just a game….Now, later on through my marriage, um, my husband did get a handgun for my protection. He said it was for my protection because he worked out of town so much. If you ever need to use it, I know you know how to use it if you ever need to. It was always unloaded. It was never locked up but it was readily available and out of the reach of my kids, or so I think.

I then asked her if she ever felt unsafe or if she was ever threatened with the gun by her husband: “Yeah, yeah. When he (pause) started to get more aggressive, I would hide it different places because yeah, there was always that uneasiness in the back of my mind that he could, he knows where that gun is, he knows where the bullets are. So yeah, yeah.” Olivia echoed Heather’s discussion on guns in her community but experienced being threatened with a gun by her husband:

Yes, in my home, there was like an arsenal…He was a big hunter. He had guns everywhere. There was one in his truck. There was one by the bed until our daughter was born, um; there was a whole gun cabinet full of guns, full of ammo. There were guns everywhere…There was one time…he never hit me but it was more like he would throw me down and choke me, threaten me, um, and at one point in time after, and he had been drinking, he threw me down on the ground and then he walked out to the garage after yelling at me and when things calmed down I went out there to talk to him and he was ok then and I said, you know, he said, honestly I don’t even really know why I did that. I said ok, well, I am scared you are going to do that sometime and shoot me and not even know why you did that. He’s like, ‘well, I can’t promise that I won’t.’ So, yes, I mean if he had access to it, his temper, he would just flip and go ballistic and you know, I mean, yea, if I did the littlest thing to set him off. I felt like I was walking on eggshells and I didn’t know what he was going to do.

The uneasiness with the presence of guns in the home also resonated with Janie: “He never held it like to my face or anything but he said he would kill me if I ever left with the kids or whatever…Oh, yeah! I was afraid of him (nervous laughter), but I was weak back then.”

The continued importance of hunting and availability and access to firearms in these women’s communities still serves as one factor that promotes the acceptance of woman abuse as well as the perception and actual violence towards women. Websdale (1998, 10) argues that “rural culture, with its acceptance of firearms for hunting and self-protection, may include a code among certain men that accepts the casual use of firearms to intimidate wives and intimate partners.” Another factor still present in rural culture
that serves to maintain the culture of silence around woman abuse is non-intervention from neighbors, friends, and family.

*Rural Non-Intervention Norms*

There has been a growing literature showing that neighbors in urban communities with high levels of collective efficacy are more likely to assist each other in times of need than in those with low levels (Sampson, et al., 1997; Taylor, 2001). On the contrary, most of the women interviewed in the original Ohio study, as well as the twelve women I spoke with in the back-talk study, described their neighbors, friends, and family members as adhering to and enforcing what Browning (2002) referred to as nonintervention norms. When asked if they could count on their neighbors to help solve their personal problems, 84% of the women in the original study and 75% of the women in the back-talk study gave responses similar to what Angie recently described:

I don’t know if it’s just the turning your head and not, you know, it’s not my problem, it’s not my business, I’m going to stay out of it. I mean our glass door got busted out of the house and [I was] screaming and I had neighbors that lived across the street from me and on either side and no one ever says anything.

When I asked women in the back-talk study why they thought no one helped, some echoed the idea of living in a community in which matters of the home stayed there and privacy norms dictated that you not “air your dirty laundry.” Julie confirmed:

…Of the whole private thing. You know they don’t want to get into anybody else’s business so they just kind-of…it’s an older community too, that I grew up in…Yeah, my neighbors were all older people and were his family so there was no support, no support from them.

When asked about her ties with her neighbors, Debbie pointed out that her husband’s family were her neighbors on both sides so there “wasn’t really anywhere to go,” which only served to complicate matters and lead to her suffering in silence: “Uh, no, they never, they never really talked about it…they had talked about his father um being abusive to his mother so after a few times it was just kind of overlooked and people just went on about it.” Other women, like Anna, believe neighbors and friends may not have helped because they were too embarrassed to reveal the truth about the abuse they were experiencing at home: “You’re not gonna tell your neighbor what’s going on behind closed doors because of your shame and your guilt.”
The feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt that these women describe highlight the difficulty many women have in telling their “dirty little secret” because “everyone knows everyone” in their community. Like the women interviewed ten years ago, all twelve women I spoke with in the back-talk study agreed that life in a small town presented immense problems with regard to talking about abuse. Darlene was one of the many women who articulated a very real fear of “word getting around in a small town” that played constantly into her process of fleeing her abusive ten year relationship with her husband. She very cautiously and creatively found ways to talk about the abuse she suffered:

And I think that’s you know that’s a problem with probably a lot of people with all their friends and family like they talk and they know each other. If they feel like, I knew, some of my co-workers lived out of town. I knew they didn’t know him. I knew they didn’t know his family. I knew they weren’t going to get back to him but for people that all their friends are the same and all their families know each other, you know, I can see why they wouldn’t…Word gets around because then you have to be scared about that too. It’s like any time I did say something that I thought could get back to him, if I was drinking or something, like, ‘what did I say?’ I would be sick to my stomach nervous until enough time had passed until it’s probably not going to get back to him…But, for me, I started talking more. I was careful who I told, but I just, I just got tired of holding it in and I needed to tell somebody so, you know, so I, I had co-workers that I would talk to but again, I didn’t want it getting back to him so I was really cautious of “who” I told because if he’d a found out what I was, that I was telling people this, then I don’t know…it would have gotten worse…he would’ve taken it out on (me) somehow.

Mary spoke about the devastating effects of small town gossip on a woman’s reputation: “Everyone thinks your business is their business…it prohibits a lot of women from leaving cause they can’t handle the rumors. They can’t handle the lies. It’s horrible. Yeah, cause what’s that say about you? You have to save face somehow…ya know and you can’t do that…”

In a place where everyone knows your name and woman abuse is perceived as the norm, many women in rural areas still factor in non-intervention norms when making decisions to stay or leave their abusive intimate relationships. In addition, many women from small towns (both in the past and present) still face obstacles in seeking out and obtaining adequate formal social support services.
SEEKING SERVICES IN A SMALL TOWN

In addition to experiencing difficulties with informal means of social support in their communities, many women in rural communities are still facing obstacles to attaining formal means of social support (Logan et al., 2004, 2005). When I asked Anna if she had ever involved the police due to the violence perpetrated by her ex-husband she told a very common story: “I did, and uh…they told me they couldn't do nothing until a crime was committed and at that time, that wasn't a crime. You're telling me that you can't do nothin unless he kills me?” Many researchers have found that the pervasiveness of the community norms, as previously discussed, prohibit women from publicly discussing their experiences with abuse and from seeking formal means of support (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Krishnan, Hilbert, & Pace, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Navin, Stockum, & Campbell-Ruggaard, 1993). As exemplified in the above section, many of these women’s abusive male partners held patriarchal belief systems that served to reinforce the notion that women’s exiting their abusive relationships is a threat to men’s masculinity (DeKeseredy et al., 2005). This ideology is instituted in rural patriarchal ideologies evident in social systems. For example, Websdale’s (1998) study exemplified evidence of a powerful “ol,’ boys’ network” that oppresses and brutalizes women, further precluding women in abusive relationships from seeking and/or receiving assistance and protection. This situation contributes to survivors’ social isolation and enables perpetrators to ‘feed off of’ it (Websdale, 1998). Still, there are other women, like Audrey, who are thrust into the formal social support arena without much warning and are left dealing with the influence of systems beyond their control.

Recall, from the opening paragraph of Chapter One, Audrey’s terrifying experience of being set on fire after she had attempted to leave her physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend of over two years. Audrey’s ex-boyfriend is still currently in jail awaiting trial for the horrible crimes he committed against her and she has been entangled within a web of criminal justice personnel ever since. Although she did not speak specifically about her personal experiences with these more formal social support providers, she talked with me as a part of the back-talk study about the impact this context was having on her life. Her ex-boyfriend continuously
requests new attorneys so he can be granted a continuance and this plays into her biggest fear:

My biggest fear is that...people are going to forget. And the judge is going to get to see so many people and I'm not going to be on the front burner anymore. And I know this might sound bad, because it's not a bad thing, but every day I get better, emotionally, physically I look better, you know? Um you can obviously tell by looking at me, especially when I don't have my makeup on or my hair back, that something happened, you know? But when I have makeup on and my hair is down, if you're not right beside me, you know, or a very conscious person, you know I've been told that you you'd never know. I will always know, you know what I mean? I still feel it. But that's my biggest fear is that, you know, even though, I'm sure the judge is very smart, very educated, that I I'm going to get forgot about and (long pause) I don't want him to get off with a year in prison with time served and end up doing two years in County and that’s it. You know? I've been told over and over that not going to happen, that's not going to happen. I've been told that by the prosecuting attorney, my victims advocate… They can’t promise me that! You know, nowhere, ever in my life, did I ever think this would ever happen to me. Why would I expect anything different than the worst at this point, you know? Why would I expect for him not to get off? Why would I not expect for him to try to come back and kill me again? That's my biggest fear. That he’s gonna get a year or two, just enough time for him to sit in there and think about how pissed off he is cause he’s in there…because it's my fault, obviously. You know what I mean? In his mind, you know it's always been my fault. Because that's what always has happened in his mind, there is no doubt in his mind, he believes that I am in the wrong or that it truly was an accident. How you take a nozzle, a gas nozzle, and spray it all down the side of the car and then a match, not even a lighter, but a match comes out of your pocket?

For instance, she was recently told by the prosecuting attorney that she is required to be in the same room with him during the trial:

I don’t like that. And for them to tell me that I have to be 10 feet from him, 20 feet from him, that’s what they’re telling me, I have to be. It’s not like I can be on a camera or could be in the back. I have to face him. I’m afraid and I don’t wanna talk myself into anything, but I’m afraid that that’s going to stir up a lot of, like...I don’t wanna dream about him. If I have to think about it while I’m awake, that’s fine. But dreaming about him, I don’t like. Whether it’s dreaming about him and it’s not bad, or dreaming about him trying to come after me. And I’ve had dreams of other people that I don’t even know, try to kill me. You know, I don’t want that to happen. I don’t know. Like I said, I don’t wanna talk myself into anything like, this is what’s going to happen, but I can’t imagine seeing him and everybody’s like, oh it will be closure, it will be great. No, I’m fine! I am perfectly okay without seeing him ever again in my whole life! Why are you making me? I’m the one that’s the victim. Why should he have the right to see me? You know what I mean? That’s how I feel. And why should his family have
the right to see me? Just to say, ‘oh she’s not that bad. It doesn’t look that bad.’ You know what I mean? They have no right. They have no right to see anything that I don’t allow them to see through the internet or whatever, you know what I mean? You know, why? Why? That’s my question. It’s not fair! And I understand that you know, you’re innocent until proven guilty but what have I done? I’m not on trial. I’m not on trial but you know, and ultimately he’s in jail with no bond for over a year and a half so what the hell is going on? What’s taking so long? Let me do this and get it out of the way but don’t wait for two, three years to where I’m planning a wedding or having a baby…I’m 30 years old, like I can’t keep, I can’t keep waiting for him that’s what it feels like to me, I’m waiting on him!

By him switching attorneys, being granted continuances and being able to see her once again in person, Audrey feels these are just more weapons in the process of control that her ex has on her, even from behind bars:

He’s not, he’s not gonna give it up. He’s scared as hell to go to prison. Scared as hell. You know with him, like I said, about the child support…He was so scared to jail that he was willing to lie and hide and sneak from me, the person that he “loves” and wants to be with, so you know, I know he’s scared to go to prison and I know that’s why he keeps doing the continuances however, he does have control over my life to some extent right now. And it’s not right, at all!

Audrey was an exceptional case in the back-talk study because she did not elect to involve criminal-legal personnel or other social support providers in her abusive intimate relationship, but nonetheless, it was something, like the violence itself, that has tremendously impacted her life and she has been forced to deal with the reality of it in her everyday world. Including Audrey, only two of the twelve women I spoke with in the back-talk study had experience with formal social support providers. This finding differentiates from the analysis in the original Ohio study in which 44 percent of the women interviewed sought police assistance and 40 percent received help from local shelters. Most women in both the original and back-talk study who stated that they did not seek out formal services, mentioned the influence of rural social norms and general acceptance of woman abuse in their families and communities (as previously discussed) as reasons why they did not seek out formal help. Many women in both studies also talked about the existence of an ol boys’ network and the realities of their geographic and social isolation that kept them suffering in silence.
Ol Boys and Isolation: Who Ya Gonna Call?

Many women in the back-talk study confirmed the findings of the original study in regards to the existence of an ol boys’ network in their small rural communities, even now. Terri talked with me recently about the influence of an ol boys’ network that played a huge role in her talking out process. Terri’s ex-husband was a fire fighter and most of his friends and family members were “old school cops, firemen, or military men.” She spoke at length about these men and their general devaluation and degradation of women and all things feminine, highlighting the unwritten but certainly real rule of male domination and patriarchy in both the public and private spheres in their small rural community. Terri insisted that it is difficult to talk about abuse in a small town with a good ol’ boys network because “for some people…they want everything to “seem” normal.” She goes on to explain how his “tough guy” persona served to silence her and prevent others from stepping in:

I knew that they were going to support him pretty much no matter what and even though I know some people knew how things were because they saw it, but he was a tough guy. And but still, it was like, you know, they defended him and I know one time, I mouthed off cause it was the first time he grabbed me by the throat and choked me… but there was other people that I know who would have defended him and stuck by his side, partly because I think they were scared of him. A lot of people were.

Anna also confirmed the existence of an ol boys’ network within her small-town police department:

Just, just that they all seem to stick together…just different, whether it be different organizations or like people that, that you run around with, they all stick together. You feel like you don't have a fighting chance... Your fightin not only who the abuser is but it seems like you're fighting everybody…

Susan also spoke about the ol’ boys in her town and the influence they had on her and her best friend remaining silent about the abuse they were experiencing:

My girlfriend, my other girlfriend was going through a hard time with her husband and she was married to a cop and he said ‘who you gonna call?’ He broke her arm, you know, he laid her in the hospital one time. Who you gonna call? So they had us kind of like, ‘who you gonna call, nobody’s gonna help you, if somebody was gonna they’d have stepped in’ you know?
Susan’s situation is representative of many women living in very small rural towns with the presence of the good ol’ boys network and the pressure of keeping up the façade of normality, in the face of embarrassment, shame, and guilt. The inability to tell their stories of abuse and to possibly seek help perpetuates isolation on many levels.

Due to their rural locations, most of the women in both the original and back-talk studies were geographically isolated from formal means of social support (see Logan et al., 2004, 2005) as well as informal processes of social control in the form of neighbors, friends, and families. All of the women I spoke with in the back-talk study agreed with women from the original study that these forms of isolation are weapons in the arsenal of abuse. Amy discussed the lengths her abusive ex-husband went to keep her isolated: “My first husband, we lived in the country, I had no car, so that's how he kept me isolated... I wasn't around or supposed to be around anybody.” When I asked her why she thought he did this, she replied “that maybe I would tell the dirty little secret” and went on to explain that he told her that the abuse was her fault and if she ever told anyone that “nobody’s gonna believe you…I'll kill you.” To say that isolation and fear tactics go hand in hand would be a severe understatement.

Beth also learned to live with the isolation tactics of her ex-boyfriend in an effort to “save a fight,” like many of the “keeping the peace” strategies reported by the women interviewed a decade ago and discussed in the previous chapter. She talked about his fear of her hanging out with her friends, which proved to isolate her from the help she could have received:

I mean, if it's just, if it's like ‘oh were going to go out to lunch’ it was always like, ‘well I can I go?’ You know, ‘what are you doing? You’re a whore,” blah, blah, blah. And you know, the verbal abuse would kick in and then you just got to the point where you are like is it even worth it? Just, come on, if you want to go sit and watch me eat food let’s do it, just come on. Because, you know, I'm not going to sit here and argue with you…so just to save a fight…I had my reasons for everything, you know. It’s a very real fear that something else might happen and if you could just contain him while he’s here and not expose anybody else to it.

Gina also spoke of deciding to isolate herself, so to speak, so as to prevent an argument that would lead to her “getting hurt.” She tells the story of getting his permission to go out with her sister and then getting berated afterwards:
He was fine with it until I got home and then it wasn’t ok. Like, ‘were you out bein a slut?’ you know, I’m like I am not dealing with this right now and I went in to bed and he ripped the mattress off the bed like ‘no, we’re going to talk about this’ and like, so it was like, he’d say he wanted me to go out and do things, but then if I did, it was like you know, I’d just get like, ‘were you doin this, were you doin that?’ So it was like yes and no but after my daughter was born, I didn’t even try after that one time, when my friend was going to Florida. I would take her and we’d go stay at my sister’s and have sleep-overs with her kids but that was, that was about it.

Like the 58 percent of women in the original Ohio study who turned to at least one friend for help, most women I talked with in the back-talk study did mention having friends but many of them were isolated from them, did not discuss their abuse with them, or were trying to protect them. Liz recalls:

I had my aunt and uncle but they um you know they have two little boys and one night I did try to go stay there but he was threatening to come there you know and I didn’t want to put them in danger. My uncle, who is my mom’s brother, is very anally retentive and scheduled and perfect, for lack of a better word, or so he thinks, and going to him and saying, again, I need help, is just not something I wanted to do because that means that whole embarrassment, that ‘you should’ve known better.’ You don’t want the lecture…Yes, now would he have open arms, open arms and helped me? Of course, you know. But at the time you’re so cloudy and just, there’s a million things going through your head…what if he tries to come here and hurt the boys or you know, something like that, you know that’s the last thing you wanted. I had my reasons for everything, you know and it wasn’t an excuse, it was very real.

Liz described the very real fear that something else might happen to someone she loved if she were to reach out to them for help. Her decision to not expose anyone else to his potential violence acted as another form of isolation, as a way her abuser isolated her from the potential help that she may have received. Jackie recalls feeling this way in the beginning of her abusive relationship:

I had friends who gave up, who went out drinking all the time lost their child support, lost their aid to dependent children and that could’ve happened to me. But it didn't because I had just a few supportive people who help and I think that that really makes a bigger difference than you know.

A few women in the back-talk study did seek out formal services in their small rural communities, but hearing the wrong words often made it worse.
The Wrong Words: Unhelpful Help

When studying rural and urban women’s perceptions to barriers to victim services, Logan and colleagues (2004, 54) note: “Rural areas have fewer available services and the few that do exist must cover large geographic areas, the quality and consistency of staff are problematic, and there are higher costs associated with rural services while individuals in rural areas have fewer personal resources to pay for costs.” As women navigate the multiple oppressions and violence in their rural communities, some do seek services but unfortunately, they are sometimes faced with less than adequate resources to meet their needs. In their study on wife rape, Bergen & Barnhill (1996) found that many social support resources, including police officers, spiritual and religious counsel, and advocates for battered women, did not provide sufficient support for women who have experienced rape in their marriages. Evelyn, a woman I spoke with in the back-talk study who had experienced years of rape at the hands of her ex-husband, was the only woman who spoke with me about turning to formal social support providers who failed to meet her needs. She recalled her experiences in seeking help earlier in her marriage:

I went to one counselor, um, we were trying to go to counseling, marriage counseling, my ex-husband and I and actually we went to a couple different people um think two years into the marriage we went to a counselor and I told her what was going on and she just looked at me, she said ‘why are you still with him?’ And it was, it was the wrong thing to say to me then because I wasn't ready to leave. I wasn't going there to leave. I was going there to try to fix things and it would've been so much more helpful if she would've just started talking to me about how I was feeling about all that stuff and I, I probably still wouldn't have been talked into leaving for a few more years after that because it just wasn't an option to me then.

Like a few women in the original Ohio study who sought help from spiritual leaders, religious communities, or places of worship, Evelyn also went to her pastor for guidance:

Um, the second time, we went to a pastor and HE initiated that during our first separation to get me to come back. He's like ‘here, I'm going to counseling now, come back.’ The pastor had no experience with domestic violence or if he did, he was horrible. He told me to be submissive to my husband and to…Yeah and he um thought that if I were submissive that he was I think he was thinking that the problem was that I wasn't, I was holding off on sex and not giving in enough. Like a lot of couples have issues with different levels of desire. I was always kind of suspicious of that because of my experience but he told me to be submissive and for my husband’s particular problem, that just made him have to work harder so…that just made it worse.
Evelyn was the only woman I spoke with who discussed how religion plays into abuse:

I think that the church and religion plays a role in abuse. A big role. They condone and even direct the kinds of relationships that abuse happens in and when women try to get out they, they um focus too much on the family and too little on people and spirituality of those people.

Evelyn believed that her spirituality has changed as a result:

I think it permanently, I think it permanently changed. I mean I still belong to a Quaker meeting, but it's hard for me to go. It's hard for me to be around people who think that divorce is wrong, although there are a lot of people in churches now who don't, but in my particular church, there a lot of people who do and it is hard for me to listen to some of the biblical lessons that are just honed on and honed on about relationships...when people leave their marriage, there's always a sense of how is she gonna be, is she going to be promiscuous? Is she going to get into another relationship? It's almost like a relief when someone remarries, you know? Or is completely celibate and I did neither. And um, so when you date around for a few years, it's almost like you can’t go to church.

Evelyn’s experience with her church in her small community points to the notion of yet another instance of patriarchal ideologies that foregrounds their policing of women’s sexuality and sensuality after divorce:

YES, YES! And that's very unhelpful. I think it's why churches are losing their congregations...so even though they may say, okay we’ll grant you a divorce, or your divorce is okay and will try to support you, but still that underlying notion of how is she gonna be? Is she going to be sleeping with the whole town?

The very interesting point of departure here is that there were not many women who could talk back to the findings revealed in the secondary analysis that pointed so intently to the lack of accessible and adequate resources for the many women who were seeking formal social support in the original Ohio study. The findings regarding the characteristics of both abusive male partners and rural communities, along with the upcoming findings regarding women’s conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization in this chapter (as well as the importance of context with regard to age, motherhood, love, and sexual jealousy as evidenced in the following chapter) may play prominently into women’s decisions not to seek out formal avenues of social support. But in the end, as prefaced in the beginning of this chapter, talking truly mattered in the lives of these women.
Talking Helped

As previously stated, only three women I spoke with in the back-talk study described experiences with formal means of social support and all three of the women’s experiences hinged on the notion of talking with someone who believed, supported, and helped them overcome their abusive situations so they could “go on living.” Anna stated that she would rank her drug and alcohol counselor and the shelter staff as the best source of formal social support because they were “amazing people…just amazing!” Anna spoke about how she felt the first time she walked into the shelter:

I was scared. Very scared…About everything… Because I wasn't sure…Still tinkering with the drugs and the alcohol… And I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing and I wasn't quite aware of the extent of the damage that had been done but, they believed in me and they still believe in me. Cause I think if I didn’t do the drug and alcohol and come in here, I wouldn't be sitting here today…I'd be dead. I do believe I’m worth it now. Cause when I first come in here I sit in that chair with my head down and my arms crossed and wouldn’t look at nobody, wouldn’t talk to nobody, cause I didn’t want nobody to bother me. Just leave me alone. But it changed slowly yeah…through a lot of blood, sweat and tears!

I asked Anna how they helped her and she replied:

They sit and listen to me (and) it is important, because I never, I kept the demons and the secrets hidden for all them years… And they sit and listen to me. They offered me advice. They offer the help. They cried with me. They cried for me.

Anna spoke about how her victim advocate’s belief in her got her through some very difficult times:

I think she believed in me… at first, before the rest of them, kind-of attached cause they are always telling me now, ‘I’m family’ so, but, she was always there. I could call at any time and talk or I would show up and be, when I lived in town walking distance I would be sittin here waitin when they opened up…I mean, I would come up here and I had, that one day I come up here and I had $300 in my pocket and you could go within a block radius of here and get whatever you want but instead, I’m out here sittin waitin on them to talk.

I asked Anna what talking allowed her to do:

It took me a while to trust em... But slowly, I mean, everything started comin out. It felt good to get it out. It did. To release the demons because my, because I always refer to them as my demons but, and by exposing my demons then they don’t have as much control over me anymore. Because now all the dirty little secrets are out. It feels good. It’s like a weight so now I can go live.
Evelyn spoke of a call that also saved her life:

And then my cousin who had been through two divorces told me one day she just, like five words, “you'll know when it's time” to leave in this really understanding way. And when I didn't leave, she gave me a call. She never called me before that, you know, never called me. But she knew what I was going through and she called me and she says Evelyn, I really think you ought to go to the women's center and get some counseling you know for yourself if nothing else. You're going to need someone to support you through this and your family is not going to. And she was so right that it was like one of the best things that somebody did, my cousin, just giving me that call.

Evelyn was in counseling at a women’s center for five years after she divorced her abusive ex-husband and she spoke to me about how it took a long time for her to recognize herself as having been abused, which is a prominent theme explored later in this chapter:

I didn't really think I qualified for domestic violence. I do consider myself as having been really abused because I didn't perceive the sexual abuse as being abuse. It took a while for my therapist to convince me. When I went to counseling, I thought I was going to regain some self-esteem, which I did, but it took my therapist a while to convince me and to really get it into my head that yes, I had been abused.

Evelyn discussed the impact the counseling had on her entire life:

I think that if I had not gone to counseling, that I never would have made it through nursing school. I never would've made it through my divorce in as good of a mental condition as I did. And the, the counseling was so helpful. Um, a lot of women don't get it or quit partway through because of some perceived problem with their therapist or something but for me, I knew that that I wasn't going to get the support that I needed from my family because they had already, just out of inconvenience to them, pushed me back. Um, and I knew I didn't want to go back. So I think, you know, my whole life would have been different without the phone call.

She continued to discuss how talking with someone about her experiences may have helped her to recognize the violence as abusive and leave sooner:

No, no, the whole relationship was I think wrong from the beginning. I think maybe if I had gone into counseling, with a good counselor, that they wouldn't defined, they would have been able to um work out that I had been molested as a child and that as a preteen and that I had a lot of self-esteem problems. It might have helped talked me through some of the things that I was going through back then, about my brother and the relationships that I was in.
Audrey admits: “for a long time, I did not want to talk about it. It was all my mom wanted to do and it was very, I had a lot of anger towards her for that.” When I asked if either she or her mother had received any type of counseling, she stated: “No, I um you know, at this point, I don’t have any insurance um she um you know, her insurance wouldn’t accept it…it was kind of weird with the counseling thing. So no, we haven’t.” Audrey’s mother had started a foundation for her to help pay for the exponential medical expenses she has incurred as a result of her ex-boyfriend’s horrible act of violence against her. Her mother had tried many times to get her to talk to someone so Audrey began speaking to small groups of high school students:

Um, it’s overwhelming, you know? And you know it’s kind of like, do I tell my story? What do I say? What do I leave out? You know, do you talk about the drinking, do you not? They are only 15 and 16 years old. The fact that it is a small town, do I tell them about going to jail? And then, what if I’m in their classroom? What if they tell their parents and then they tell the school?

Audrey began substitute teaching and coaching at a local middle school in her home town after her recovery and often worried that “word would get around” in her small town. She wanted to tell her story as a warning to young girls and also as a way to heal from her tragedy, yet she was concerned that being “totally honest” would hurt her reputation as a good teacher and therefore risk her job. The context of place influenced her ability to break her silence about her abuse. Besides speaking to small groups of students, I asked Audrey if she ever reached out to other social support providers:

Oh, I’ve only talked with her [the Advocate at the local women’s shelter] once and it was just by myself and it was just basically we met and we talked for a few minutes and then we talked about you and like your research and then she gave me your contact information and stuff like that so it was probably a week before I contacted you that I met her, yeah.

Essentially, I was the first person who Audrey had spoken with at length about her relationship, the abuse she endured while in it, the violence she suffered as she tried to end it and her survival after it. After our two hour interview, I asked Audrey how she felt about talking to me about her experiences and she simply said: “Talking helps.”

SUMMARY

The women in the back-talk study confirmed many of the findings of the original Ohio study in regards the characteristics of men who abuse women and their peers that
bear representations of male peer support, including frequent drinking with and attachment to abusive male peers and the consumption of pornography. Where the women differentiate however, was in the differing demographic of women and men in terms of employment status in each study. The back-talk study included women who reported having more education and more stable employment with male partners who were under- or unemployed and the original study consisted of the reverse: more women reported being under- or unemployed with less education with male partners who served as sole providers. The interesting finding here is that both groups of women expressed that their partner’s adhered to a societal and familial patriarchal ideology that functioned to some degree in their relationships, even in the midst of women’s role as sole provider. Another finding supported by the women in the back-talk study was that rural community attributes, including women’s perceptions of safety and adherence to non-intervention and privacy norms still remain an important feature of rural life that changed little through place and time. Finally, the biggest differentiation between the original and back-talk studies was the experiences women had with formal social support providers. Although the influences of the ol boys’ network and attendant geographic and social isolation were discussed as similar experiences for most women in both studies, nearly half of the women in the original study discussed their experiences with obtaining formal assistance when they were trying to leave their abusive relationships but only three women in the back-talk study had any experience with outside assistance. Next, we turn attention to women’s reactions to emergent themes of the secondary data analysis.

NOT VICTIM ENOUGH, BUT ALWAYS A SURVIVOR – WOMEN TALK BACK TO THE SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

In the context of violent victimization, women are active agents engaged in on-going processes of creating meaning for themselves and their situations. Lempert (1996) asserts that it is imperative for research to focus on how survivors interpret their experiences with violence and how those meaning-making interpretations affect their help-seeking processes, rather than concentrating on what they do. This process is imperative not only for survivors, but also for anyone coming into contact with these women on any level. How we as researchers, social service and criminal-legal personnel,
family, and friends interpret, produce meaning, and label women and their experiences of victimization ultimately determines their survival. How women themselves come to define their own experiences with violence in interaction with constrained situations, multiple oppressions, and impeding social structures also determines their ability to survive and maintain agency.

My original goal for the back-talk study began as an attempt to recruit enough women from the community to participate in several focus groups to talk with me about their experiences with violence in their intimate relationships. Specifically, I called for women who had “ever had unwanted sexual experiences while trying to leave a husband or male live-in partner or have ever had unwanted sexual experiences after leaving a husband or male live-in partner.” After weeks of waiting on a response, I simply called for women who “may have had (or are still experiencing) unwanted abusive experiences (i.e. physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse) in their past or current relationships,” adding that they could request individual face-to-face interviews if they did not feel comfortable speaking in a group setting. I received a phone call the next day to set up my first interview and scheduled 11 more personal interviews soon after.

As a researcher who wanted to study women’s experiences with post-separation sexual assault, I was apprehensive about changing my inclusion criteria as I was warned (by many prominent researchers and social service advocates in the field), that I may not hear about any experiences with sexual assault, especially when separating, during the course of my interviews. To add to my growing anxiety, at the beginning of my first interview with Anna, the first words out of her mouth were, “Well, you know, I don’t think I fit what you’re looking for ‘cause I ain’t never been raped or nothing like that.” So I simply smiled and said, “Well, we’re just going to talk.” After repeating that exact phrase ten more times, I am glad we did just that as I soon discovered how much talking truly mattered. Talking with 12 rural women who had experienced violence throughout their staying and leave-taking processes allowed for an examination of how these women made and continue to make meaning of their relationships, actions, and decisions, thereby constructing themselves and others along the way. What follows in this section are the findings from the back-talk study that echo the findings of the secondary data analysis. The women’s stories revealed the limitations in their language to describe their abusive
experiences in the face of what they “knew” or thought they “should know” due to public stories that create appropriate victims, the invisible nature of sexual assault, and the powerful stereotype of staying, deeming them not victim enough.

I’M NOT THE LIFETIME MOVIE VICTIM

Ferraro (2003) calls attention to the constitutive role of language in creating, maintaining, and changing social relations and constructing social realities. Applying a label of ‘victim’ to women experiencing abuse organizes an understanding of them as particular ‘types’ to whom certain attributes are ascribed and orientations taken (Holstein & Miller, 1990). The binaries and stereotypes associated with “battered” women (i.e. poor, weak, passive, and nagging women who deserve it) fail to appreciate the multidimensionality and complexity of how women define and understand their own experiences (Kelly, 1988). One way “legitimate” victims are created is through public stories that serve to provide a frame of reference with which to learn about the constructed “realities” of woman abuse. By understanding the importance of public stories that represent legitimate victims, we can begin to understand how many women conceptualize their experiences as not “qualifying” them as victim enough, thereby influencing their decisions to stay in their abusive relationships.

Creating Legitimate Victims through Public Stories

Popular culture is a concept of ideological contestation and variability, to be filled and emptied, to be articulated and disarticulated, in a range of different and competing ways.33

British cultural studies professor, John Storey (1997), asserts that the consumption of culture aids in the creation and production of meaning. Cultural messages are interpreted so they become recognizable and sensible according to our own particular backgrounds and social contexts, thus becoming a part of our frames of reference in how we interpret what is going on around us. Stenbacka (2011) adds that this cultural consumption acts as an important instrument that not only affects how we learn about ‘reality,’ but also how we are expected to react to this reality. Scottish sociologist Lynn Jamieson (1998, 11) discusses the importance of public stories in private and public life:

Cumulatively, pervasive stories are inevitably consequential for both private and public life. They become representations that people cannot avoid working with at both a deep and surface level. Pervasive stories are a stock of narratives that anyone can draw on or distance themselves from when telling their own story. Stories also feed into both public and private lives when they coalesce into official views shaping public policies, laws, and the distribution of resources.

Due to the abundance of feminist activism and scholarship over the last few decades, public knowledge about domestic violence and sexual assault has abounded, and so has the plethora of attempts at describing, defining, and naming these experiences. With that, particular public stories about domestic violence have erupted in the public forum with two major themes: the violence is physical in nature and is perpetrated by the big, strong man who maintains power and control over the small, weak woman in a heterosexual relationship (Donovan & Hester, 2010). This dichotomous view inhibits understandings about individual’s experiences outside the boundaries of this binary (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer relationships and relationships involving other forms of violence (i.e. sexual, emotional, financial, etc.)). It also serves to thwart a deeper engagement into the true realities of those living with these experiences of violence (Ristock, 2002). The story also constructs victims of domestic violence along particular feminine ideals as weak or passive and without agency, impacting women’s recognition of the many faces of abuse and their sense of self.

Does This Really Qualify as Abuse?

The public stories of domestic violence often get played out on the television screen in the form of Lifetime movies and many women in the back-talk study relegated their experiences as not “qualifying” as abuse because, as Lena declared, it didn’t “seem that bad…it wasn’t the shocking, extreme, Lifetime movie, abuse.” She added: “I didn’t think I fell in that group of bein’ abused because I wasn’t you know, my body wasn’t broken, he didn’t set me on fire, he didn’t take a gun and he didn’t take a knife to my throat…” The idea that abuse needed to be extremely physical and life-threatening also impeded Gloria’s characterizations of the abuse in her three-year marriage:

I guess it would be really, really bad like you know, puttin’ me in the hospital or you know, layin’ me up for, you know. I thought that was bad. I just didn’t think knockin’ around and getting drug through the driveway or even as, I mean, ‘what, you got humiliated? He threw a plate of spaghetti in your face, slammed the plate
in your face, you know, what’s so big about that?’ You know, it was just like, I guess it was that. It was just never that big of a deal, you know what I mean?

I asked Ellen if she thought of herself as a victim of abuse:

No, I don't, I wasn't afraid for my life with him. Like, I mean I know there are guys with completely different issues and people get scared of being killed and stuff but I don't think I was ever afraid that he would kill me and when I left him, I didn't really think I qualified for domestic violence.

Faith echoed Gloria and Ellen’s classification of “real violence” by also adding an important dimension: the fact that her bruises were often not visible, “like those battered women on TV:”

Oh yeah! Yeah, drug behind a car or something. Broke both legs and you know, shot but not killed kind of thing but this just beatin’ up and getting drug everywhere, or choked to death, or choked when you were pregnant, you know? And I didn’t have wounds you could see. ‘Oh, got choked, really, I don’t see anything. I don’t see any marks.’

For many women, like a majority of the women I talked with in the back-talk study who confirmed the findings of the secondary analysis, their scars remain invisible due to the nature of the violence committed against them, rendering them still not victim enough.

MY SCARS ARE IN A PLACE YOU DON’T TALK ABOUT

So I went in [to her local health department] to get checked out cause of my cold and this NP went through the whole spiel about bein’ abused and so I said yes. I finally said yes. And you will never believe what she said! She said, “Well, where are the marks, the bruises?” And I told her that he didn’t really hit me. So she says, “Either he does or he doesn’t. Which is it? Are you a victim or not?” So I guess I’m not. He didn’t leave scars where anyone could see. What was I supposed to do, pull down my pants? That’s where my scars are…Down there and in here [pointing to her heart] and in here [putting her finger on her temple]. My scars were in a place you just don’t talk about.

Even though ten of twelve women I interviewed in the back-talk study claimed that they have never experienced sexual assault, every one of them, like Angel, discussed at least one sexually assaultive experience. Heather talked with me for two and a half hours about the violence she faced staying and exiting the course of her eight year relationship with her ex-husband. When I asked her if she recognized she was in an abusive relationship, she responded:
I don’t consider myself as having been really abused because I didn't perceive the sexual abuse as being abuse…. When I went to counseling, I thought I was going to regain some self-esteem, which I did but it took my therapist a while to convince me and to really get it into my head that yes, I had been abused.

During that time, Heather also spoke about her trouble with convincing the community she was being abused:

Let’s see, I'm thinking more about convincing the community because I moved back to the community I grew up in but convincing myself that I was abused, I think um you know, I knew at some level rape is abuse but when you tell somebody that you are abused, then you know, I had told friends who I thought understood and then I heard them telling somebody else that her husband knocked her around and I thought, no not really…I think it’s physical, yeah, just people automatically…I think that I thought that when I left him. And it didn't take her [therapist] that long to convince me but the cultural norms are strong and um…Yeah um yeah. There's a whole liberal Quaker culture that that is strongly you know behind I think stopping domestic violence but (my) community is still in a conservative culture a lot more than I ever realized.

For women in abusive relationships, the labels of “victim” or “abused woman” have negative stereotypes and attendant consequences and many women experiencing abuse must ‘measure up’ to societal standards (Newman, 1993; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999). These formal and informal norms of who is deserving of help act as a double-edged sword. If women meet the criteria, they get offered assistance (which may or may not be helpful) but as a consequence, they get to bear the label ‘battered woman.’ The woman’s view of herself is publicly reframed and she may come to question if she has indeed measured up.

Mary informed me that she wasn’t sure if she was what I was looking for (regarding the inclusion criteria for the study) because she had no “sex stuff” to talk about. However, throughout the course of her back-talk interview, she revealed abuse by men in her past and infidelity in the abusive relationship she came in to discuss. She also discussed some “less desirable” things she did to get drugs when she was an addict (as one of many consequences of the violence in her relationship):

I had to do what I had to do. After I left, I had nothin. I was on the streets. Literally on the streets. I had no car, no house, no money and I was an addict. I did whatever it took to get the next high to forget my demons. I did whatever they (men) wanted me to do, sex, sex with people watchin. I didn’t want to do it.
Sometimes it was forced but it didn’t matter to me then. *I* didn’t matter to me then.

Mary, confirming several accounts of women interviewed in the original Ohio study, discounted the sexual assaults against her as ‘legitimate’ abuse because she was a drug addict. She ‘obviously’ did not care what was happening to her so why should anyone else? It wasn’t until she became clean and sober that she was able to realize that she mattered; however, even when I asked her directly, she still denies that her experience qualifies as abuse.

*Porn and “Extra People”*

As previously discussed in the beginning of this chapter, pornography was an emergent theme in both the original Ohio study and the talk-back study with regards to its role in male peer support. For some women in the talk-back study, pornography also emerged as a theme also as component that related directly to sexually assultive experiences. The type of pornography consumed by male partners was described as providing a fantasy narrative that often was played out and involved “extra people.” Devon came through the door worried that she would not have much to add as she “had no experiences with rape or sexual assault.” After 20 minutes, I asked her about her husband’s social habits and she discussed his obsession with pornography:

“*No he, no he drank socially but I don’t know, he um he had a fixation of like the internet and sexual stuff like that on the internet so he was always on the internet looking at porn. And so he would go down after he came home from work and sit there until 2,3,4, o’clock in the morning and look at pictures and videos or whatever and ya know I would go down in the basement cause it was in the basement and he would click it off. But I mean later I had found out that he had extra people so… That’s the, that’s the thing. I didn’t know that some of it was abuse.*

Like some women in the original Ohio study, Devon recounts the time that she came home from work and found her husband and some “extra people” in the basement, where he coerced her into making out with his best friend’s girlfriend. After she made them leave because she “was done with that stuff,” he hit her with his fist and forced her to have sex with him. While speaking with Lisa about the red flags she saw in her relationship with her husband of three years, she commented:

“…Then it was like other things that he encouraged me to do. Um, him and his friend encouraged me and his friend’s wife to make out so it was like things that...”
he wanted that he was trying to get me to do for his own pleasure you know. It was like, even if I felt uncomfortable, you know, just drink a little bit more and it will be ok, you know.

Kelly’s husband was also “into porn (and) always had a fantasy of doing a threesome and talked me into it…He wasn’t always interested in sex with me per se, it seemed like it was always others.” Kelly asserts that the threat of his physical violence was a big part of the reason she submitted to his fantasies of sex with other people outside their marriage. Devon, Lisa and Kelly all identified the physical violence as a legitimate form of violence, while the coerced and forced sex seemed just a part of the deal of marriage, a finding similar to that of the original Ohio study.

Coerced and Forced Sex: It Has a Name?

Carrie’s fiancé and his buddy went to a bar one night and didn’t come home. She was sleeping on the couch and a woman called his phone and said he had “just left with his pants down.” When he finally made it home, Carrie confronted him about the woman’s accusation. She tearfully recalls: “That night he wanted it anally and forced it. I cried and asked him to stop and he said ‘I thought you wanted it.’ Everything changed after that. I would have sex with him just to get him off my back…once a month “shut up sex” to leave me alone.” The experience of using sex as a protective strategy to prevent physical violence was a common theme echoed by the women in the back-talk study.

Ellen spoke at length about her experiences of coerced sex, even though she did not call it that or recognize it as abuse, in many of her relationships:

Ellen: I felt, you know, there's always a pressure in most of my relationships with men to have sex, constant,
MS: even when you didn't want to?
Ellen: Yeah, trying to put, put them off, trying to talk about something else, have fun… Get to know them. I don't think I really perceived it as being any other way. Um, until my divorce, until you know, in the time before my divorce and during, I mean women talked about it. I certainly grew up around a lot of women who were very independent and went to Quaker colleges who talked about it but my personal experience was that I just expected that. I expected things to be that way.
After years of coerced and forced sex, Ellen realized what was happening to her had a name:

I read. I took out a book. I watched an Oprah show on TV (laughing). I think two years into my marriage; I was watching an Oprah show. It was on date rape and the guys were defining date rape and the girls were defining date rape and they had completely different definitions of it, of course, and I realized, that’s when I realized that what was happening to me was rape. Period. So I started reading about it, cause it was this whole new thing. So that's why I feel so bad about it. That's why I'm so angry at him. That's why I don't like to be in the same room with him anymore and I started reading everything I could. I went to the library and um, checking out books and yeah, eventually I started checking out books on divorce and custody too.

So now that Ellen had realized that she had been raped, she decided to test out her own theory:

I um, I decided to test the whole thing, um, just in my own mind, um, for my own satisfaction because like sex would go on and on and on and he couldn't get off until I was uncomfortable. And after reading everything, I got the this idea that he can't get off unless I'm uncomfortable and it progressed through the marriage to where it wasn't just being uncomfortable, it has to be worse than that…So one day I decided, you know, I'm going to test this. I'm going to start right at the beginning and see if it works and and it did. He got off before he even got his pants down because I started the fighting even before he got me in the bed and it worked and I knew. I knew that he was sick and this was never going to end… So sometimes I would fight early into sex just to get it over with.

Ellen read books and watched popular television programs to discover that what she was experiencing at the hands of her husband was indeed rape. She even tested a theory, one that proved correct, and used it to lessen the trauma of the rapes. She describes seeing herself as finally a “legitimate” victim of abuse but yet still stayed in her abusive marriage. She, like many of the women in the original Ohio study, negotiated the stay-leave process and that negotiation in and of itself, deemed her and many other women I spoke with, not victim enough.

I STAYED SO I WASN’T THE RIGHT KIND OF VICTIM

Staying in a violent relationship is implicitly defined as deviant, as violating societal expectations, and requires an explanation in order to assess the reasonability and rationality of women’s decisions (Loseke & Cahill, 2005). Despite evidence of the multi-dimensionality of women’s relationships, the typical “leaving and returning” cycle of the
uncoupling process, and the women’s own desires and constraints with staying or leaving, staying still requires an explanation. All women who were interviewed in the original Ohio study had eventually left or were in the process of leaving their abusive partners at the time of the interviews; however, some women stayed. The length of time they stayed after the abuse had occurred varied from a few weeks to ten years. Many women also went back to their abusive partners many times before the final termination of the relationship and many also described being in more than one abusive relationship. Much like these women, the twelve women I spoke with in the back-talk study all described a leave-taking process that included going back, staying, and leaving again in the course of a few months to many years, with one woman who has remained in her abusive relationship for nearly 40 years.

Recall that the main finding presented in Chapter Four is that many women’s decisions not to leave their abusive relationships are entirely rational when contextualized. The failures of the criminal-legal and social support systems and hardships with children sometimes leave women with no other choice than to learn to survive while staying in these violent situations. A major condition of formal and informal assistance was proving to others that they intended to change the circumstances of violence by leaving or filing charges (Lempert, 1997). Because of this, women find themselves forfeiting the power to define themselves and their experiences of violence in order to survive. The women who talked back to the secondary data analysis not only echoed these findings, but also provided another important dimension to the process of staying: it further constrained their ability to be deemed “legitimate” victims, proving they were still not victim enough.

You Stay and Hope for Change

“Marriage is forever.” “You take the good with the bad and learn to live with it.” Several women interviewed a decade ago, as well as a few I spoke with in the talk-back study, were “raised” to believe in the absolute sanctity of marriage, regardless of whether it was good or bad. Sharon explained that she “grew up in a traditional middle-class family, non-drinkers, church, um, the, the idea of you know, once you’re married, you’re married, you know, no matter what.” Leaving a marital relationship goes against prevailing rural social norms and leaves survivors open to public censure (Websdale,
Women who leave face stigmatization from their families, neighbors, and friends who oftentimes adhere to an ideology of rural patriarchy. Several studies have found this ideology functions to prevent women from leaving their abusive situations.\(^{34}\)

Evie grew up in a conservative family where divorce was not considered an option so she hoped for change:

I left twice, separated from him twice to go, more to try to get him to stop then to really leave…just to say you know, this isn't...I grew up with a very conservative family and I didn't really see divorce as an option for me and um, I thought it, that he might change and um and things just progressively got worse through the marriage. We had three children together and you know to, in public he would harass me, but that was acceptable in a lot of circles… he could put on a good show as being, you know, wining and dining, being sweet.

Many women feel ensnared in an ambivalent emotional situation involving the desire to maintain their relationship and the longing to simply stop the violence in the very real hope that the abusive partner will change (Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2009). For many women in both studies, like Gina, believing that their abusive male partners could change was the hope they needed to keep them in the relationship:

I don't know how to explain it. I just wanted him to stop. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want him to leave. I didn’t want to get a divorce. I just wanted the hitting and the hurt to stop. I loved him and I wanted him to change. He was a good guy. That’s why I married him. [She begins to cry] I just wanted to believe he could be that again.

Beth discussed a very familiar desire:

I just wanted it to change…I just wanted us, you know, like every night I would hold her [her daughter] and I’d have her sleep in bed with me and he’d be out on the couch or whatever and I’d just think, ok, I just want it to be you and me, like I wish he would just not hurt us.

Rhonda adds:

Um, it’s just been a real big question all my life, why I don’t and why I haven’t left. And I think it all goes back to, what makes me think I deserve better? Well, I don’t know. I guess it’s, for me, I don’t think I deserve anything else because I’m really afraid to go out there and start it all over again. My God, I’m 57 years old!...But I’ve come to the point where I do care about him, I do love him for the person that he could be, you know, he’s still got a little bit of that in him.

\(^{34}\) Please see DeKeseredy & Joseph (2006), Websdale (1998), DeKeseredy et al. (2006) and Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy (2008).
Rhonda also points out the very real fear of leaving that was highlighted by many of the women interviewed 10 years ago. Fear of the unknown – be it fear of life without marriage or fear of institutional victimization – has also been found to delay a woman’s escape from violence within the home (Stanko, 1988). Many women, both then and now, spoke of these fears as being compounded by the depression they suffered as a result of the violence in their intimate relationships.

*Staying Depressed*

It has been well-documented in the social science literature on violence against women that depression is often a consequence of abusive intimate relationships. Most women interviewed in the original Ohio study, as well as in the back-talk study described depression and low self-esteem as not only consequences of the abuse they experienced in their intimate relationships, but also as an important factor as to why they stayed. Holly described the deep depression that influenced her decisions to return to and stay in her abusive relationship:

> Right and you know, you know it’s hard. You know the reason I think that I probably did continue to go back um is because I felt at one point like he was all I had. You know what I mean? When you’re in a depression, which I was, and you don’t realize that at the time, it’s just that warm body maybe, three times a week, to sleep next to you or that one night of not arguing and sitting down and watching a movie, it makes it worth it. That’s what you’re thinking. Obviously it doesn’t, you know, but.

Becky echoes Holly’s feelings about depression that left her alone and isolated:

> I lost a lot of friends. I had one friend, uh, who would come stay with me at the house sometimes and she saw what was going on and she tried really hard then, like, you know, ‘it doesn’t have to be like this’ and I was like you know, I felt, I, I, my self-esteem was so low at that time that I was like this is how it’s going to be and I accept it. And I got really depressed and she ended up moving away and that was like the only friend I had. I didn’t tell my sister anything anymore. I didn’t tell my mom anything anymore because they were just going to tell me to leave and they didn’t realize it wasn’t that easy.

Other women, like Kathy, who admitted being depressed most of her life, stayed because they believed they had in some way deserved the abuse:

> I lived with it. I had been raised in a conservative background and have been promiscuous for a few years and he was calling me names that I felt that I had deserved for some reason at that point in my life. I kind of, I don’t know if I, it was my penance or something.
Norrine felt she was programmed to commit to her marriage after years of psychological abuse that ripped away her self-esteem:

When you’re programmed… you believe that you're nothing. And they keep telling you over and over that you’re nothing. Nobody will ever want you. Nobody will ever love you. I own you… Till death do us part…It's like you’re a prisoner. I'm the master, you’re the slave.

Stay for Children

As we will see in the following chapter, the context of motherhood is imperative to examine when discussing women’s stay-leave decision making processes in abusive relationships. Many of the mothers I interviewed in the back-talk study echoed many of the mothers in the original Ohio study as they shared that their concerns for their children often led to them staying longer. Tina discussed what she did for her children:

I thought, if I fight back and he really gets violent, I won’t be here for my kids so, I would give up and either act like I couldn’t walk anymore, which sometimes was hard, or you know, sure I fought back, but I only fought back so much cause I didn’t want to not be there in the morning when my kids woke up.

There are devastating financial consequences for women with children who are separating from abusive relationships. Single mothers are more likely to have incomes below poverty levels (34%) compared to single fathers (16%) and compared to other family structures (Fields & Casper, 2001). Like many women interviewed ten years ago, the mothers I spoke with in the back-talk study based their decisions to stay in abusive situations, in part, on their financial dependence on the abuser. Rhonda stayed to provide her kids with the material things she may not have been able to afford had she left their father:

I could sit here and say that I did it for my kids. My kids were my world back then, that I wanted them to have the things…I wanted them to have, to be in sports and have the clothes and have the shoes that everybody else had and the only way I could do that was because of him. You know, he’s the one that is the breadwinner. Even if I went out and got a $5 an hour job, I couldn’t give them that. I couldn’t give them their prom dresses, you know, I wasn’t about to go to Goodwill and buy them their prom dress. I would rather put up with a year of bullshit and steel $20 out of his pocket when he came home from gamblin’ in order to pay for a prom dress [She begins to cry] than to leave and let them have nothing.
Rhonda believes that staying for so long in her abusive marriage provided her with the resources that she may otherwise not have had because it afforded her the opportunity to set the stage for raising a good family:

Well it’s right for me. It’s worked. I’m still here. I have good kids and I have good grandkids and their families are okay and I think a lot of people don’t understand that. That that was what it was worth for me.

Staying: Painting the Big Picture

Rhonda and I talked for over an hour specifically on the concept of staying as she was the only woman in the back-talk study who was still in her abusive relationship after nearly 40 years of marriage. I would be remiss if I didn’t end the back-talk analysis with her story on staying. When I asked Rhonda if there really was an answer to the common question, “why did you stay?” her honest response not only reflects every “reason” all of the other women in both studies discussed, but it also paints the picture of why many women feel as if they are not really victim enough:

I don’t know if there is. There isn’t really one answer because when you’re life changes, because your life changes every day, every week, every year, year to year, and you live for something different every year or every month you know. And I did care about him. I know that he’s a good person inside, um, I guess I’m kind of like my mom and always have to be taking care of someone, um, even though he was that way towards me, um (laughs). I continued to pack his clothes for him when he left. Continued to cook suppers for him even though he was three hours late and I don’t have a reason why I did it. I just did it because (crying) that’s the way I wanted it to be. I wanted to be able to have a family dinner so I continued to cook a dinner every night, even though he wasn’t there to eat it with us. I cleaned the house, um, washed the clothes, things that I was “supposed to do.” I was supposed to stay home and raise the kids because he was supposed to make the money. Um, (crying) I did what I thought was right. And then when you finally realize that what you did wasn’t right, or could’ve changed, or could’ve been better, you know, I had no, I wasn’t promised better. Nobody said, if you leave, I promise you, it gets better out there cause nobody talked to me about it. Um, so I guess figuring it out on your own, that’s what I figured out. Just to stay. Because I figured, well, with his health he’s gonna croak pretty soon (laughing) and maybe I won’t have to put up with it or maybe he will get in that accident when he’s drunk some night and I’ll just have to deal with it you know. And bad thoughts do go through your mind. You do wish he would die of driving home drunk and God forbid not killing anybody else you know on the way. You do hope that bookie shoots him, you know, because sometimes you do get that desperate. But I had a way of talkin’ myself outta stuff like that and just sayin’ “put up with it, you know, it won’t be that long.”
When I asked Rhonda if she thought that it will ever change, she replied, “No.” And after a long pause, she continued, “No, I think this will just continue ‘til one of us dies.” Things have changed for Rhonda. Rhonda’s husband died in early May 2013. Even though many women deemed themselves ‘not victim enough’ based on their characterizations of ‘victims’ in the context of their social realities, all of the women in the back-talk study, regardless of the number of times they stayed and returned, viewed themselves as survivors.

**I AM A SURVIVOR**

Labeling women only as ‘victims’ makes invisible the other side of their victimization: the active and positive ways in which women cope, resist, and survive (Kelly, 1989). Women are often simultaneously victimized and actively surviving but their strength is often counter evidence of their victimization as strength and victim are incompatible qualities. “If we construct battered women as having agency, we expect her to be able to leave; however, if she is a victim, it undermines the inherent survival skills and strengths that many battered women typify each day they live with violence” (Kanuha, 1996, 39). For instance, if a woman physically resists violence and is severely hurt, she is told she should have acted more passively (i.e. as a legitimate victim) but if she decides it is more beneficial to her not to resist, then she is viewed as accepting the violence (i.e. as a bad victim). Kelly (1989, 184) highlights this no-win situation for women: “whatever choices women make they are told they should have done the opposite.” Blame is also gendered in that female victims are held responsible for their role in their own victimization and their use of violence in violent relationships is not tolerated, while men’s violence is not only tolerated, but often accepted and condoned in U.S. society.

The process of surviving abusive relationships emphasizes the interrelationships of emotional, practical, and structural barriers (Kirkwood, 1993). As active, resilient social agents, women negotiating in violent relationships may be assertive or passive in weighing alternatives, making plans, trying out strategies, and attempting to protect themselves and their children (Sev’er, 2002), as shown in the original Ohio study and, as we will soon see in the proceeding chapter, in the back-talk study as well. They sometimes call police or contact other formal social agencies and many often turn to
informal social support networks (DeKeseredy et al., 2006, 2007). Many women, as evidenced in both studies (as was highlighted in the previous chapter and will be discussed in the next chapter), also utilize forms of passivity as a survival strategy: inaction through keeping the peace or ‘giving in’ to unwanted sex, redefining the situation, and reevaluating their positions (Basile, 1999; Kelly, 1988). These behaviors are not necessarily irrational or unreasonable but may be what kept them alive (Mahoney, 1991). There is agency in silence and inaction in violent relationships and the attempts to stay produced active strategies and traits that reflect normality, not a malformed psychology (Kirkwood, 1993). Regardless of the strategies used, women’s negotiations require an enormous amount of effort and all of these women prove to exercise agency in interaction with constrained situations, multiple oppressions and impeding social structures. The significant argument put forth from the secondary data analysis was that women in the original Ohio study, even when they stayed in their abusive relationships, were actively navigating the stay-leave decision-making process, demonstrating resilience and resistance as survivors. I felt it necessary to explore women’s constructions of not only their victimization, but also of their strength and survival in their abusive intimate relationships.

I’m Still Here: Conceptualizing Survivors

The public stories about what a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault looks like or how they are ‘supposed’ to behave often does not correspond with women’s own perception of themselves in the context of their situations. As has been shown time and time again in previous research on women who have experienced violence in their intimate relationships (cited in Chapter Two), the traditional picture of battered women as passive victims has been counteracted in recent years. In fact, many women act with agency to address and name, resist and prevent, and cope and survive with the violence perpetrated against them. Further, the construction of ‘victims’ as weak and resonant with femininity not only influences women’s sense of self (Baker, 2008) but also stands as a point of contention with many, especially evident in the experiences of the women I interviewed in the back-talk study. Recall Audrey’s story from the opening of this dissertation about the years of physical, verbal, and sexual violence in her relationship
that ended the night she almost died as a result of being lit on fire by her boyfriend.

Audrey was one of many women I talked to that had an aversion to being called a victim:

I don’t like the word victim! I’ve always been a survivor my whole life since the day I was born, not like anything ever happened when I was born, but I mean survivor, it’s just my natural, I always had to be. Um, there’s been divorces, there’s been husbands and step-brothers and step-sisters and you know stepfather’s abusive you know, verbal abuse, you know? My mom kind of sowing her wild oats and you know, me having to take care of my sister, you know? So I always had to be a survivor and to push and to work hard so that’s, that’s, that’s what it is.

Toward the end of our hour-long interview, I asked Anna if she thought of herself as a survivor and she exclaimed: “I’m alive! I’m sittin here talkin to you!” Gina was also happy to be alive as she was unsure what her life would be like (or if she would even still be alive) if her husband had not died in a motorcycle accident:

Yeah, I’m still here! I mean, you know, there’s, I think that, like I said, I don’t know what would’ve happened if he would have still been alive but I kept me and my daughter safe until I didn’t have to worry about it anymore and you know it’s been a long road. Even the last three years, trying to talk to people, trying to get it out and trying to make myself accept you know, ‘it’s happened, it’s done, look at what you’ve learned from it.’ It’s like you know, it’s just one chapter in the book and it’s over and it’s time to move on to something else. I know what to look for now and I know how to not get myself back in the same situation.

Some women in the back-talk study negotiated the socially constructed binary of victim/survivor in terms of staying and leaving their abusive relationships. Naomi described her idea of survivors only in terms of ‘getting away’ from the abuse:

Well cause they’re victims when they come through the door [of shelter] but if they go back, then they’re still victims. They’re not really surviving it until they fully get away and work on whatever it is until they don’t go back, either to that particular situation or another situation. I think you gotta work on yourself, find out who YOU are, cause I know several people they jump outta one situation into another situation and here I thought I was crazy for a while because I didn’t want a relationship with anybody and I still don’t. I mean, there was a little glimmer there but no, deep down I wanna find out who Naomi is.

Naomi also discussed the concept of strength as being associated with surviving (interpreted as leaving at first, but in hindsight, while staying as well):

I always thought I was a strong person, but evidently I wasn’t. But then I think now, I am a lot stronger than what I give myself credit for because I survived the relationships that were abusive, I survived life on the streets as an addict and
alcoholic. I AM stronger than what I ever dreamed I could possibly be. And I am now.

Evie also discussed victim/survivor concepts in stay/leave terms:

It means, it means I left and I didn't stay in that relationship. And, and the women who leave are survivors rather than victims that’s what I was taught. I felt like I was brainwashed to think that though by my therapist.

I asked Evie if she believed that women who stay could be deemed survivors as well:

Yeah, I do by knowing, you know I think there's some situations that, that you can't leave without hurting yourself and others in your staying, to, to stay alive or to, um, function until you have a chance to leave, but, but you know what's going on, your cognizant of everything. I think those women are survivors too.

Rhonda discussed how her concept of victim/survivor changed over time and how she put her ‘survival tools’ at work in her decades-long abusive marriage:

I think I was a victim at first um, earlier on, um, because like I said at first, it caught me off guard the very first time it happened and then thinking that it would never happen again and having it happen, it was like, ‘oh my God!’ And then halfway point through, it’s like, I knew it wasn’t right. I knew I should stop it somehow…so then it changed into the surviving part of it trying to, whether it be trying to change or trying to redirect him, you know, trying to change him was my surviving tools, which didn’t work for a while. You could look at it now and say, ‘well it kinda worked because he calmed down.’ What did you really use? I don’t know. Maybe by standin up to him a few times at the end? Maybe by fighting back, um, maybe by really calling his bluff and saying, you know, ‘you don’t treat me like this. You leave cause I don’t need you any more?’ Maybe calling his bluff and sayin, ‘are you crazy? I can survive without you.’ Or you know, ‘it doesn’t take that much money. Do you want me to prove it to you?’ By standing up and saying those things over and over again I think that I can say that I used those survival tools to try to redirect him off of me.

Like Rhonda, Leslie also learned to survive in her abusive relationship by using strategies that would aid in her survival:

Cause there were times when you had to just zip it in order to make it stop. You had to play dead sometimes. Pretend that you couldn’t walk, um, pretend it didn’t bother you. You weren’t gonna argue back, walking on eggshells just to appease him. So it was a combination of both depending on what, what the situation was and how far I could go. Because I could read him, I could tell when it was comin. And you learn to read em and you learn to um, know how far you can take an argument. You know what words to say and what not. You know what to bring up and what not. Rehashin’ the past of um, whatever may be the last fight is not a good thing. You learn those things. It’s just like the ‘live and learn’ thing. ‘Oh
been there, done that, not gonna do that again’ you know? Or I can get away with it to this point, you know? But you know, I was so tired of letting him win and letting him be right all the time that I just started fightin back and… I would…I wasn’t very strong back then. He was a lot stronger back then than he is now.

Many women I spoke with in the back-talk study echoed the experiences of the women interviewed over a decade ago with regards to their survival strategies and many spoke of similar conceptions of the ‘strength’ they needed to find in order to survive staying and leaving their abusive relationships.

_Finding the Strength and Still Surviving_

As a result of the secondary data analysis, I found that many women in the original Ohio study indicated that they had to find enough “strength” to leave (and oftentimes stay in) their abusive relationships. Strength was often conceptualized as an inner quality that women “found in themselves” and deployed when they “couldn’t take it anymore.” In her exploratory study of the inner resources used by 17 women in abusive intimate relationships, Davis (2002) found the majority of women used strength as an inner resource that highlighted themes of survival, resilience and self-protection when navigating stay-leave decisions. These themes rang true time and time again during the course of the twelve interviews with women in the back-talk study (as shown above). I asked these women to expand on their own conceptualizations of this inner strength both then (while negotiating stay-leave decisions) and now (after they have left or for one, while still staying). After all that she has endured during and after her violent relationship with her ex-boyfriend, I asked Audrey where she finds strength to survive:

You know, um my volleyball girls, definitely, just you know, before that, just the fact that I’m not going to let somebody determine, I’ve always had to fight and work hard and determine my own future or fate, if you will. I’m not gonna let him do that now. Why would I, you know, go against everything that I have ever known because of one day or one moment, you know? Has that moment been a long, long, long road? Yes! But I can’t let him have any more control over my future, destiny, fate, whatever, than he already has. You know? And especially this winter, in the cold Ohio winter when I wasn’t working and I had my own place, was there a lot of long days of sitting on my couch feeling sorry for myself and crying and eating and you know, doing everything you can imagine just to self self-soothe without being like destructive? Yeah, you know um, but now that I’m working again and coaching volleyball, those days are less and less. You know, do I have my moments when I feel sorry for myself? Yeah I do and I hate every single one of those moments! It makes me angry!
Gina reinforced the notion of ‘real victims’ even in her descriptions of strength:

Yeah, I do…I just feel cause I got out without really getting really really hurt, I mean, he never put me in the hospital or anything like that…he could’ve, yeah, he never stabbed me. I feel very blessed in that sense that ya know, I was never a part of that major major violence but the emotional is the worst.

Like many women who sometimes employed the various survival tactics, mentioned previously, while negotiating the violent terrain of their relationships, Evelyn described her decisions to stay as a weakness but finding the strength in her darkest hour allowed her to free herself of the abuse:

I don't think staying was a strength; it was a weakness. I had to think enough of myself to leave. I had to, I had to decide that I was worth something, that I wasn't all those names he was calling me and my defining moment was sitting on the bathroom floor and deciding not to kill myself but to leave. I mean, after that moment, it was all downhill. There was no question ever since that moment, in my mind, no regret. I mean I walked out into the kitchen, he was cooking and we just had a major argument and he had just pinned me on the floor, and, in front of the kids, and he was cooking dinner while I was sitting in the bathroom contemplating suicide. And to me that picture was just like, I'm not staying with this guy. Yeah, the closest I have ever been to killing somebody was when my husband was going to rape me again and I told him, um I would. I feel like I meant it. And I haven't really felt guilty about it. I mean I know, I know that I could never have carried it through. That was just like, like, um wow! Where am I at? Has it really gotten this bad?

After the discovery of her ‘new-found strength,’ Evelyn has worked to rebuild her self-esteem and is beginning to believe she is now worth it:

My self esteem now, since then, is um, a lot better…I, I guess it’s something I'm proud of having a sense of self and want to hang onto it and maybe do a little too much some times. Do I think that I’m worth it? Yeah, oh yeah I’m worth being in a healthy relationship…Am I worthy of love? Yeah, I think so. I do now.

Anna indicated that a higher power and the love and acceptance of her family give her strength:

My family and my God, my higher power gives me strength…Just friends’ parents that have accepted me for the good, bad and the ugly and they know all my demons and what I’ve done. Yeah, I trust them with everything that I was or will ever be. That, for some reason, I was kept alive through all of this and I’m not sure what my higher power’s purposes was but if I can help somebody else not go through what I did, then I suppose, I suppose it was all worth it.
Anna’s worth was also tied to her concepts of strength as I asked if she believed she was worth it:

I do believe I’m worth it now. Cause when I first come in here [shelter] I sit in that chair with my head down and my arms crossed and wouldn’t look at nobody, wouldn’t talk to nobody, cause I didn’t want nobody to bother me. Just leave me alone. But…it changed slowly yeah, slowly yeah…through a lot of blood, sweat and tears!

As we will see in the next chapter, motherhood played a huge role in women’s stay-leave decision making processes. Gina and I had a long and tearful conversation about what gives her the strength to get through those days when she is reminded of her husband even years after the abuse ended as the result of his fatal motorcycle accident:

I just try to not even think of it anymore; um try to get over it. It’s so hard! Like I said, it’s just so hard to get over. It’s just…I hate it. I hate this (crying)…Thank you [for the tissue]. I just think of my kids and their smiles and that what gets me through, their faces it’s just, you know. They’re what gets me by. I still don’t sleep. I’m lucky to get three or four hours, if I am lucky. Um, sometimes I take a sleeping pill when my kids aren’t home cause I have insomnia and I just…and just knowin that my mom is there for me, 100% no matter what.

At one time, Maggie, like many women in both studies discussed, stayed for the safety and financial well-being of her daughter, but she also proved to be the source of strength that propelled her to leave her abusive husband:

I think after um he held [her daughter] and wouldn’t let me hold her and she was crying and he was cussing me out in front of her, it was around that time that I started documenting everything. Cause he had destroyed the living room not too long before this so I had wrote that down and I started, it was like, you know. I didn’t really have a plan of how I was going to do it but that’s when I also started thinking crazy stuff like shooting him. I just, I knew that, I felt like something was building up inside of me like, almost like a fire. I was so angry with him that I just, I got to the point where I loved him but I hated him too. Like I hated that and I didn’t want, I know that she wouldn’t be the happy, sociable little girl that she is now if she would have had to listen to us screaming and fighting all the time. So she was my source of strength.

In order to secure a safe and happy life for them both, Maggie still gains strength from her daughter:

What gives me strength now? Same thing, [my daughter]. You know, I’m not a perfect parent. I never will be. I know there’s things that I, you know, probably could have done different. There are things in the future that I’ll probably wish I would have done different but I just want her to have the best life she could
possibly have. You know, I want her to be happy. I want to be happy, you know? I deserve to be happy...I think knowing what I want and knowing what I don’t want has given me strength to work towards wanting a happy life. It doesn’t have to be anything spectacular. As long as I feel safe and my daughter’s safe, I’m happy!

Vivian best conceptualized her inner strength as a testament to her resilience throughout the course of her five year abusive marriage:

He did everything to tear me down. He beat me, raped me, and called me every name in the book. But I fought back, sometimes physically, but most of the time just in planning. I knew deep down I had the strength I needed to make a change. I just had to believe I was worth it. I had to forget what I thought everyone would think of me, in my town, in my church, in my family, and just do it. Like Nike, right? So I left, I went back and stayed, and left again, all the while believing that there has got to be a better way, a better life. So I just kept survivin’ and believing I could do it. I was strong then and I am strong now. Why? Because I made it through, with the battle scars to prove it and I am better for it.

SUMMARY

The twelve rural women in the back-talk study as well as many women in the original study, made and continue to make meaning of their relationships, actions, and decisions, thereby constructing themselves and others and their conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization factored tremendously into their stay-leave decision-making processes. Confirming the secondary data analysis findings, many women in the back-talk study relegated their experiences as not “qualifying” as abuse because “it wasn’t the shocking, extreme, Lifetime movie, abuse” because it wasn’t always overtly physical in nature and didn’t always result in life-threatening injuries. Another common thread between the women in the two studies was identification of physical violence as legitimate forms of violence, while sexually assaultive experiences were not deemed abuse. Confirming the findings of the secondary analysis, all of the women in the back-talk study negotiated the stay-leave process and that negotiation in and of itself, deemed them not victim enough. The women in the back-talk study not only echoed similar reasons for staying (i.e. the failures of the criminal-legal and social support systems and hardships with children), but also provided another important dimension to the process of staying not uncovered by the secondary analysis: it further constrained their ability to be deemed “legitimate” victims. Finally, all of the women in
the back-talk study confirmed the secondary analysis findings in that they also
demonstrated that even when they stayed in their abusive relationships, they were
actively navigating the stay-leave decision-making process, employing a variety of
survival strategies and demonstrating resilience and resistance as survivors. Whether
their strength was described as coming from the love and acceptance of family and
friends, a higher power, or love for children, it enabled them to eventually terminate
abusive relationships, while it also enabled them to stay when leaving might have posed a
greater threat to their survival and their children’s. The inner resource of strength was
highly connected to women’s sense of self and self-worth, which proved and ongoing and
persistent process in the long road to living a safe and happy life.
CHAPTER VI
CONTEXT MATTERS: AN INTERSECTIONAL REALITY

We exist in various social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power (i.e. race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.) and oppressions (i.e. prejudice, class and gender inequality, ageism and heterosexist bias, etc.) and no dimension should be privileged in explaining violences against women (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Relying on simplistic gendered (and raced and classed) binaries minimizes these hierarchical structural forms of oppression and serves to limit a more inclusive consideration of the contexts of violence (Erbaugh, 2007). Sokoloff (2008) asserts that an intersectional analysis views the historic nature of specific groups of people in ways that capture the interlocking relations between systems of oppression and discrimination and reveals that privilege does not exist without domination. Women’s oppression is often multiplied by their location at the intersections of systems of power. Kanuha (1996, 41) declares that the “tag line that domestic violence affects everyone equally trivializes both the dimensions that underlie the experience of these particular abuse victims and more important, the ways we analyze the prevalence and impact of violence against them.”

Attending to the uniqueness of rurality is imperative in sociological and criminological research, but most importantly, to the lives of rural women in the context of intimate violent relationships. In foregrounding the roles of gender, race, class, space, masculinities, and patriarchies in research on violences against women, the notion that ‘not all women experience violence equally or in the same way’ is clearly evident. These multiple intersections of power and oppression, like concepts of agency and resistance, are not monolithic, static, nor rigid. These intersectionalities shape our individual experiences, intimate and familial relations, and community and social locations. They also are constrained by our individual and social location and impact our decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency. Revealing the complexities of women’s experiences and struggles during and after separating from a violent partner reconstitutes violences against women as a public crisis that demands critical attention.

This chapter presents the second group of findings from the talk-back interviews and brings to light novel insights not presented in the original or secondary analysis, adding a
new dimension to a few themes previously discussed (work and motherhood) but also highlighting themes not yet explored (i.e. age, love, and sexual jealousy). In this chapter, we will see first how work defines identities, which become challenged in the context of social and economic transformations and how rural men and women re-articulate the gender order in their communities and how this all factors into women’s stay-leave decisions. Second, we will view the contextually different stay-leave decision-making processes of older women through cohort, period, and aging effects. Third, we then examine the role of the institution of motherhood and the attendant consequences of conforming to the social expectations of ‘good mother’ that keep mothers in abusive relationships in a constant state of negotiating the realities of living with and leaving the violence that affected themselves and their children. Next, we explore the lived experiences of women negotiating love and abuse in their intimate relationships to attempt to arrive at a better understanding of how their conceptualizations of love play a significant role in their decision-making processes. Finally, we examine the context of betrayal through infidelity and sexual jealousy as a commonly shared experience in the lives of rural women negotiating decisions to stay and leave abusive relationships.

WORK MATTERS

One of the most fundamental structural changes in North American society since World War II has been the movement of women into the paid workforce and the effects of this transformation for family life in general and intimate relationships specifically has become the focus of much empirical literature in the field of social sciences (Newman, 2009; MacMillan & Gartner, 1999). Most researchers who are interested in the effects of employment on intimate partner violence view employment as a primary gauge of access to economic resources, while the violence results as stress due to a lack of financial means afforded by a good job and this correlation is often presented as it varies among women of different socioeconomic (Moore, 1997; Schwartz, 1988). Many researchers in the field of violence against women assert that a lack of financial resources in the household leads to stress and frustration that often result in violence and women’s economic dependence on men may keep them staying in these violent relationships until they are able to financially support themselves and their children (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000; Mullender, 1996; Wuest et al., 2003). Many also argue that women’s increased
education and employment will lessen their dependency on their abusive partners and may propel them into leaving, leaving sooner, and staying gone longer (Kalmuss and Straus, 1982; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Purdon, 2003; Jensen, 2006). However, as MacMillan and Gartner (1999) argue in their exploration of class, gender relations, and marital violence, employment is important not only in terms of the economic resources, but also as a primary component in the construction of identities in general and also of masculinities in men in particular. If, as research on the social construction of gender and masculinities suggests, the gendered division of labor is a key foundation for contemporary social constructions of gender and notions of masculinity remain strongly tied to beliefs about being the sole provider or primary breadwinner (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2004; Connell, 1995), then male employment in relation to female employment is of major importance in the study of violence against women (MacMillan & Gartner, 1999). Therefore, contrary to popular notions, a woman’s employment may actually increase, rather than lower, the risk of violence perpetrated against her if her male partner is unemployed as it stands to challenge the cultural standards of male dominance and control over the economically dependent female as he employs violence as a way to repair his damaged masculinity (Bourgois, 1995; MacMillan & Gartner, 1999; Moore, 1994; Simpson, 1992; Weis et al., 2002). Thus, it becomes necessary to continuously view rural women’s individual experiences as a part of a larger set of social and economic structural factors (Donnermeyer et al., 2006) as they negotiate staying and leaving in the context of the violence in their lives. The women in the talk-back study discussed how they viewed men in terms of work and how work defined men’s identities, how these identities change when the work disappears or changes, and ultimately their experiences show how they were actively re-articulating the rural gender order in their own homes and communities.

Real Men Do Work: Work as Defining Identity

Men’s violence against women has been understood as expressive, instrumental, intentional, and functional – as a symbol of male authority and power used to fulfill the socially expected (and accepted) roles of husband as provider who monitors and controls women’s adherence to the roles of wife and mother (Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004; Boonzaier, 2008). In fact, as Hogg and Carrington
(2006) note, rural masculinities are constructed out of these rigid divisions of labor that define strict gendered roles premised on the control and subordination of women. They also contend that due to this ideology, rural men tend to be more heterosexist and homophobic than urban men. To add, in her research on rural Australian men who are violent towards women, Wendt (2009) found these men less likely to view their abusive behavior as a problem, regarding it as a legitimate expression of their masculinity.

Brandt and Haugen (2005) argue that specific portrayals of rural masculinities have changed over time and are rife with stereotypes depicting hegemonic models of strength and power, especially following the development of the pioneer or logger within the forest industry. This notion of the rural man as ‘real’ man is evidenced in discussions with women and men who denote real men as closer to traditional models of hegemonic masculinities (Sach, 2006; Campbell and Bell, 2000; Brandt and Haugen, 2005; Hogg and Carrington, 2006). Further, many of the women in the talk-back study talked about work as it tied to men’s identity and essentially defined their partners as men. Felicia discussed the difference between city men and rural men in terms of the work they do:

I think the work is different…like construction, factory, uh, agricultural, coal mining, farming. Yeah, you know you’ve got this hard workin MAN of the house, the meat and potatoes and they’re gonna be the boss and everything. You know, that’s their role and you know, we’re not gonna stay home and play cards we’re going to go hunt, we’re going go frog giggin all night and we’re gonna stay up late drinkin. Well, you know I don’t know what’s, you know, what’s the difference though really, in big business men getting together and gloating about their sales that they you know, their commissions that they got that month and let’s talk in this, the Hilton and we’re gonna buy drinks for everybody and let’s get a bunch of girls and you know?

Many women I spoke with echoed this sentiment in that their partners were tied to their work in ways that formed the essence of who they were. Abby stated:

Joe was a hard worker. He was a logger and that is hard work. It was hard because he was always so consumed with that lifestyle. It was like he became what the work meant – to be strong, dominant over all things weak. It is so ironic looking back on it.

Agriculture or farm work also sets the stage for the construction of particular types of masculinities in rural areas that are seen to epitomize hyper-masculine qualities of physical and moral strength, courage, male bonding, and the rejection of all things
feminine (Connell, 2006; Hogg and Carrington, 2006; Little, 2003). Loretta discussed her husband Jim in terms of the work he did everyday on their family farm that called for the adherence of specific gendered roles:

He was a good farmer. He was a hard worker. He learned from his dad. It was a family-owned farm and we all helped. It was good for the kids to see how hard their dad worked to provide for them. He wanted the boys to help with the plowing and the cattle. The girls needed to learn how to clean the house and cook the meals. That was just the way it was and it seemed to work for a while.

Other women I spoke with also described their partner’s work in other stereotypically masculine jobs. Melissa’s partner was a coal miner who was described as “a hard worker, a man’s man,” while Jenny’s partner, a firefighter was described by his friends as “one of the toughest sons a bitches around” who was strong and stood as a symbol of strength in her community. Becky described her husband, Dave, an “out of town” construction worker and the impact of his type of work on her life:

He works physically hard um he’s always been a good worker. He’s never called off work because of sick and stuff. Never missed a day because he didn't want to go. His work meant a lot to him. He needed it to live, but he lived for it. Sometimes I would say ‘it’s just the job,’ ‘it’s just the job that makes him do the stuff he does.’ Like the women, the drinking, the clubs, the gambling, the violence. It’s kinda expected because it’s what ‘they’ do.

A common theme emergent in the talk-back study was the construction of the ‘real man’ in a rural context in terms of the work they do. Next, we will see what happens to ‘real men’ when the work they are so intimately tied to disappears or changes in form.

When Work Changes: Challenges Rural Masculine Identity

Many rural men, prior to the end of the last century, obtained an income from owning family farms or working in extractive industries (e.g., coal mining) (Jensen 2006; Lobao and Meyer 2001; Sherman 2005) and as shown previously, some men were still working in these fields in the past decade. Reinforced by a dominant patriarchal ideology, most of these men’s intimate relationships were generally characterized by a rigid gendered division of labor in which men were the primary ‘bread winners’ and women were relegated to the home doing housework and raising children  (DeKeseredy, 2007; Fassinger and Schwarzweller, 1984; Websdale 1998). Such gender relations are
still existent today and are still apparent in a considerable number of rural communities, much like the ones from where the women in both studies lived.

Social and economic changes that have occurred over the last 40 or more years have created major challenges to rural men’s masculine identity; thus, their power has become fragile (Campbell and Bell 2000; Jobes 1997; Johnson 2006; Sherman 2005). There has been a major decline in the number of family-owned farms because many people cannot make a reasonable living from them (Jacobs 2005; Lobao and Meyer 2001). Like many women’s experiences in the talk-back study, Loretta and Jim had to sell their family farm because there was “just no way to make it work anymore.” To add, many rural towns, such as Nelsonville, Ohio, that had to rely on a small number of industries for employment, have been economically devastated by the closing of sawmills, coalmines, and other key sources of income (Jensen 2006). In 2002, after nearly 70 years of operation, the Rocky Shoes and Boots factory closed in Nelsonville, moving to Puerto Rico, and none of its 67 displaced workers were offered replacement jobs (Price, 2002). As Gallup-Black (2005, p. 165) correctly declared, “the relationship between violence and economic hardship...defined by job loss, unemployment, poverty, and population loss—can be just as pronounced in rural or small population areas.” Melissa spoke with me about the toll it took on her life when her husband’s coalmine was closed down:

Frank worked the mines for over 20 years and his whole family did! They all lost their jobs when the mines closed in our area. It was complete hell for everyone! No one knew what to do. There were no jobs for the guys here and none of us had enough money to move. He wasn’t about to let us go on Welfare so we both hit the streets but I was the only one who could find work. He never did get anything, which just made everything ten times worse at home.

Hannah also discussed how important working was for her and her family:

I'm used to being on my own. I'm used to people working. I come from a very hard-working family, you know, that what we do. We work period point blank. You don't live off the government. You don't ask people for handouts. You don't move in with somebody. You just do what you have to do to live and to live decently, you know?

Many of the women I spoke with sought out employment or found jobs when their husbands become unemployed, when their farms become unsustainable or less profitable, or when the mines and factories in their areas closed (Albrecht et al. 2000; Lasley et al.
In fact, what stands out in the talk-back study as compared to the Ohio study of ten years ago was the different demographic of women, as referenced in the preceding chapter. Although sixty-five percent of the women in the original Ohio study had some post-secondary education, half were unemployed. In the talk-back study, however, ten of the twelve women had college educations and all were employed at least part-time, with over half considering themselves as the primary providers for their families. Deidre discussed going back to work after her husband lost his job when a local factory relocated overseas:

So when he lost his job, I went back to school and to work. I worked at a temp agency for awhile until I got hired on full-time at the place I work now. He collected unemployment and basically did nothing. It wasn’t like there wasn’t anything out there for him to do but he didn’t want to do it. It was women’s work. You know, the kinds of jobs women should be doing. And there was no way he was ever going to be associated with any of that.

This rural economic restructuring has not only created unemployment in men, it has coincided with the increase of pink-collar jobs in these areas, which further changes the entire dynamic of the gendered divisions of labor at work and at home. Instead of risking the embarrassment of working in a stereotypically feminine job, such as in the service industry, many men chose not to work and draw unemployment until they could find an ‘appropriate’ job more suited to their hegemonic masculine standards. In fact, Becky’s husband Dave waited years for work until he was hired with another construction company:

There wasn’t much around here but there was some jobs. I mean, none that the men would do, especially the ones that were used to doing all that manual labor and stuff. You know, building houses, puttin on roofs, workin the mines? It was just somethin about doin women’s work that he was not gonna do. He was the man! Well, the man needed to get to work!

Like Dave, Jim, Hannah’s fiancé, worked construction and the seasonal landscape in rural Ohio made working consistently, very difficult:

He is working sporadically, just here and there, you know? It's the slow time because its construction, it’s housing. People don't get houses done around Christmastime, so again, I'm footing all the bills, you know? I couldn't afford my birth control for literally two weeks while there was an overlap in my insurance, whatever. So I ended up getting pregnant.
While job losses have occurred in both urban and rural contexts, especially in the past few years, many researchers insist that there has been a more considerable economic decline and social impact in many rural communities across the U.S. This “rural crisis” as Hogg and Carrington (2006) have come to describe it puts men on the losing end more because they are not only struggling to find work and make money, but are also negotiating how to revive traditional forms of masculine identity that have always been associated with ‘bringing home the bacon’ as the sole provider and head of the household (Carrington and Scott, 2008; DeKeseredy et al., 2007; Sherman, 2005). Kelly explains:

It was like he couldn’t stand it that I was working and paying the bills but who else is gonna do it, you know? He wasn’t so I had to. I worked two jobs and started going to school. He didn’t seem to mind the house he lived in that I paid for, the food he ate that I paid for. But yeah, there was always somethin deep down that even though he benefited from me workin, he was pissed that I was taking care of him. I guess he thought that wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.

Even though many women describe their partners as benefitting from their employment and education, many, like Vicky, talked about how this was also a source of tension:

With my experience with my husband, he didn’t have a college education but he was a hard worker, you know? It’s like but I think when I started getting my education, I think he felt threatened by that cause he had told me that one time after a fight. He’s like ‘you’re moving ahead and you’re gonna leave me behind.’

Because many women, like Vicky, were assuming the role of sole provider in the home by becoming employed and furthering their education in the hope of procuring a higher paying job in the future, many men felt, as Pease (2010) put it, “under siege.” These women in the talk-back study were re-articulating the rural gender order in their homes and in the small rural communities in which they worked and survived, which also factored in to their decisions to stay and leave their abusive relationships.

Re-articulation of the Rural Gender Order

The rural crisis caused by economic restructuring and the attendant unemployment and changes in the types of available jobs for men has generated a crisis in masculinities in small rural communities across the globe (Pease, 2010). As economically displaced men struggle to maintain gendered expectations from an ideal type of rural hegemonic masculinity that evades them and is losing legitimacy and power in their communities (Pease, 2010), some men seek to skirt their relationship and marital instability and
compensate by exerting more control over women, which often ends in violence. In order to circumvent the crisis in masculinities, many men resort to violence to not only reassert their control and power (Carrington and Scott, 2008) but also to bolster their damaged masculinity (Wendt, 2009). Some women I spoke with in the talk-back study, like Angie, were cognizant that their partner’s unemployment and attendant ‘hits to his manhood’ precipitated the violence in her relationship:

I would get up and go to work at 5:30 in the morning and you know would work all day and not get home until four or five in the afternoon five days a week. And it really started when he quit his job and was unemployed…. But um, I come down on him about gettin a job so he did go get a job temporarily for a few months but it never lasted so it was basically me tryin to support him. So when I would go to work and come home he would take my paychecks. He would argue with me um, to the point where I got so mad that I would just throw money in his face because I didn’t want to hear about it anymore. I didn’t want to fight. And he would take my money and go to the bars and not come home until 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning.

When I asked Angie how big of a factor it was in their relationship with her partner not having a job, she stated:

Oh it was a HUGE factor. Huge, huge factor because if he was bringing in his own money, I know, I know he wouldn’t spend it on stuff like that but because he was taking my money he was gonna put it on whatever he wanted to. And this always caused a fight.

Hannah added:

How am I broke when I am a full-time teacher? I'm working three nights a week at a restaurant, a good restaurant and making good money, um, tutoring four nights a week, how am I broke? And then you're tired and the list goes on.

Hannah was one woman from the back-talk study who articulated why she may have stayed for so long and continued to return to her abusive relationship, even though she was educated and employed:

But I think for me, the reason that I kept silent and stayed was because more of embarrassment, you know? I guess, and this is going to sound really bad, but because of growing up here you see or hear about, you know, women that are of low income that, you know, have five kids and two teeth and you know, those are the women who are openly outspoken about their abuse. So when it happens to you, as an educated woman, you don't really know how to handle that or what to do I guess and then the embarrassment that comes in because you are smarter than that, quote unquote…I should've known better.
Hannah was one of two women I spoke with in the back-talk study who held a Master’s degree and felt as if she should have known better than to get into an abusive relationship and stay for any length of time because of her education, which played a huge role in women’s conceptualizations of their abusive relationships. Lori was one of five women I spoke with who held a Bachelor’s degree and echoed Hannah’s sentiment almost eerily:

When I think about it now, I should’ve left earlier. Jesus, why did I stay? I ask myself that a lot and you know, if you were to look at it from the outside, I probably didn’t have a reason to. I was the one who was working. I was the one with the job and making all the money and paying all the bills. It was my house we lived in, my car we drove. He didn’t contribute to anything to provide a better life for me. And I should have known better. I come from a family of teachers and nurses for Christ’s sake. A good family. I should’ve been smarter than that…Maybe that’s it; I was ashamed to admit that I screwed up. I didn’t want to hear the whispers and gossip that I came from such a good family and I was so smart but I ended up ‘letting myself’ get beat up and violated in such demeaning ways. That was only supposed to happen to women down the hill who were uneducated, couldn’t leave cause they were poor or had no cars, you know? Not me, I was supposed to know better. I could’ve left sooner.

It is the common assumption that women with more education and who are employed would retain more power in their relationships. In fact, many researchers have concluded that the way to combat domestic violence and sexual assault in intimate relationships is to educate and empower women by providing decent employment opportunities and accessible options. This is not to say that this is not a possible strategy for change, but it is a call to consider the context of the lived realities of these women, especially women in rural areas. It is imperative to begin to think critically about rural gender relations and to recognize that economic and social change potentially creates or reinforces new forms of patriarchy. The back-talk study points to the general finding of the symbolic function of employment as it stands as a marker of masculine identity and contributes to the construction of masculinities, especially with men in rural areas who have experienced job loss. In essence, the lack of not only male employment in general but also ‘men’s work’ in particular, in the face of women’s increased education and employment, lead to some men adhering more strongly to ideologies of patriarchy, thus exerting control and violence in the home as a way to repair their damaged masculinities. From this talk-back study, it is evident that as new forms of patriarchy were brewing, women were actively resisting in their abusive relationships and working, both literally
and figuratively, to re-articulate the new rural gender order in the face of social and economic structural changes. This resistance varied within the context of age as well.

AGE MATTERS

When exploring differences in age in stay/leave decision-making processes of women in abusive relationships, many researchers have found that younger women tend to stay due to financial dependence and the marital imperative, while older women report staying because of the societal expectations and generational mores regarding marriage, family, and care, as well as the realities of aging that limits options (Seaver, 1996; Zink et al., 2003; Band-Winterstein, 2008). Davies and colleagues (1998) investigated the leave-taking decision-making processes of mainly younger women in abusive relationships and found that these women negotiated both life-generated risks involving factors affecting the women’s capacity for independent success (e.g. financial resources, education, job skills and stability, children’s needs, and health and self-esteem) and abuser-generated risks (e.g. abuse severity, women’s attachment to abuser, and perceived threat to harm the woman and children). Due to these exact reasons, many older women report remaining in abusive relationships because they were unable to leave when they were younger and so their confinement has become further intensified by age-related physical and social factors (e.g. financial resource deficiency through lack of income or pension, lack of education or job skills, and health/physical limitations) (Buchbinder & Winterstein, 2003; Mears, 2003; Montminy, 2005; Schaffer, 1999; Winterstein, 2006; Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2005, 2009; Zink, et al., 2006). Vivian explained:

Like I said before, there’s all kinds of reasons why you stay. It’s your kids, it’s your animals. I don’t wanna leave my animals, you know? I don’t wanna, you know my family will take me but they can’t afford to, you know, back then they couldn’t afford to and even now with this bad economy, you can’t afford it...and you know I know a lot of people that’s just livin together and just livin separate lives. Just raisin their kids and going on with their separate lives.

As in Zink and colleagues’ (2003) qualitative study of older women’s reasons for remaining in abusive relationships, I also organized the stay/leave decisions of the three older women in the back-talk study in terms generally established in quantitative sociological and epidemiological approaches: cohort, period, and aging effects. Cohort effects included many of the reasons given by younger women (e.g. education/job skills
and financial concerns), but also investment in and attachment to their marriages and families, and self-esteem and shame issues. Period effects most differentiated the older and younger women I interviewed and included societal non-recognition of abuse, the influence of stricter gender roles, and lack of acceptable options. Finally, older women’s stay/leave decisions were hinged on aging effects that included not only health challenges for the women and their partners, but also fears of loneliness, isolation and the increase of mental abuse.

Cohort Effects: More to Lose by Leaving

I got married when I was 18 and most of my friends got married when they were very young too. Um, that’s just how you did it back then. - Marie

Cohort effects involve the result of being members of a group of people born at a certain period of time. Three of the twelve women I interviewed were all born in the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, raised their children in the 1980s and became ‘empty-nesters’ in the 2000s. These women reflected the broader social cohort of working-class to lower-middle class rural middle-aged women in that they graduated high school (one went on to get her Registered Nurses’ license), married, had children, and worked after their children became school-aged. These women all married between the ages of 18 and 20 and stayed married from four to thirty-nine years. They all had children with the abusive partner they referenced and all of their children are now grown adults and live away from home. Two women got re-married (one currently is married still and one is divorced) and the other was just recently widowed. All three women discussed similar experiences with the stay-leave factors in the accounts given by younger women mentioned previously in the preceding and current chapter but there are a few meaningful differences in terms of the intensity or degree to which these factors influenced the women’s lives.

Practical issues such as lack of job skills, education, and financial resources, as well as the daily needs of their younger children were all factors the women I spoke to constantly negotiated in their abusive relationships. Teresa noted:

And I guess that’s a sad thing to think that I would have to have everything set and not, just leave to go, you know? But that’s the way I’ve been. I had to have some type of stability, some concrete place to go to where I wouldn’t have to worry about how am I gonna feed my kids? How am I gonna do this? How am I gonna pay my bills?
Marie currently works part-time at a local factory doing janitorial work but recalls that she did not work a lot during her abusive four-year marriage:

He didn’t really see the need for it but that just made it harder when I did end up leavin’ cause I didn’t have any skills, no experience, and of course, I only had a high school diploma so that wasn’t gonna get me far. I had more to lose by leaving at that point.

Although Teresa currently has a “decent” job working for the State, it hasn’t always been that way:

When my kids were growing up, I stayed home with them. I didn’t work then because I wanted to be home with them but also because we couldn’t afford it…just the cost of day care or babysitters was too high so it made more sense for me to stay at home. He still kept control of all the money though. It was never “our” money; it was always “his” and he would give me just enough to get the bills paid but nothing more.

Like Teresa, Joyce’s husband didn’t really want her to work while the kids were little but out of necessity (he was often unemployed) she had to, which often did not leave much time to pursue anything else:

Sure I would have loved to go and get more education but with three little ones, a job, and just everyday life, who has time for that? It would have cost way more to put them in day-care and we lived in the country so the nearest college would have been 40 minutes away. We didn’t have the online schools like they do now.

Teresa, one of the mothers in the talk-back study who is highlighted in the following section, spoke at length about how her daughters were her “entire reason for being,” especially when they were younger. She told of how staying with her husband allowed for them to have the necessities to be happy and healthy but also to have the “extras” (i.e. nice prom dresses, designer clothes, spending money, money to pay for extra-curricular activities, etc.) that all their friends had. After the girls had grown up and went on to have their own families, Teresa, like the other two older women I spoke with in the talk-back study, had to develop a new perspective on life in their abusive marriages:

It’s like, for years and years, I was worried about the kids, you know? It’s just, that’s your number one concern and when they are starting to go and go out of your house and have lives of their own, it’s not that you don’t care; it’s not your main focus you know?
If her kids were no longer a huge reason to stay, what was? When I asked this to Teresa, she replied: “I guess love.”

As will be highlighted later in this chapter, many women in the talk-back study described a deep emotional attachment and feelings of love that kept them clinging to hope that their husband’s would change. Teresa was the oldest woman I interviewed and had been in her abusive marriage for the longest (39 years). She talked the most about having a deep emotional attachment to her husband and an investment in her marriage, but all based on his potential to be a better person: “Because I’ve come to the point where I do care about him, I do love him for the person that he could be, you know, he’s still got a little bit of that in him.” Almost all of the women I spoke with described feelings of love and commitment in their relationships and hoped for their partners to change, but the older women I spoke with seemed to remember the nostalgic past, where things seemed better, to a much greater degree. These memories of a time when the couple were in love and happy, even though distant, were often what kept these women holding on so tightly to keep their marriages. The intense hope and desire to “get that back” to a “place we once were” resonated in the midst of violence and remained, with some, to the very end.

Marie spoke with me about her negotiations of love in her abusive marriage:

Marie: How could you love somebody that hurts ya?
MS: Did you?
Marie: I did, yes.
MS: How do you explain that? Can you?
Marie: I really don’t know if I can explain it…maybe it’s, even though it’s a sick love, it’s still a love. It’s real.

Whether it was true love or sick love, these women loved and they loved deeply, even if their husband’s love for them seemed a little less present. These women gave similar accounts of the years of verbal and emotional abuse that crushed their self-esteem, which left leaving more difficult as they began to believe the words of their abusers.

Marie explains that her self-esteem issues had begun in her childhood due to her abusive father:

It’s just, I mean, my dad he’d beat me down so much throughout my life that I believed it and then I jumped from that into another marriage with somebody that ended up that was supposed to take care of me and get me away from that life. I ended up jumpin in that again and then I had my son.
Marie believes a huge reason she stayed in this marriage so long was because she believed she was not worthy of ever being loved: “You believe that you're nothing. And they keep telling you over and over that you’re nothing. Nobody will ever want you. Nobody will ever love you.” Like Marie’s experience with past childhood abuse, Joyce had been molested when she was a child by an older brother, which played heavily into her concept of self in her later years:

Yes, it was a one-time event, um that he felt guilty for the rest of his life but it still affected me quite a bit. It affected the way I looked at relationships. As a teenager I was very, in high school, um, I was not very sexual at all, um, and then when I went to college I kind of went to the other extreme. And um, I felt, you know, there's always a pressure in most of my relationships with men to have sex…. I don't think I really perceived it as being any other way.

Marie continued to talk about how the experiences of her past, coupled with the sexual and physical abuse in her eight-year marriage became all-consuming:

There was a lot of pain and stuff I couldn’t deal with. I tried talking to some people about it but nobody really…I didn't really have people around me then who could give me the direction that I needed, that I could confide in… And I kind of went into a depression… realized that I wanted it all to end…and I realize you know, you never really tried to leave…And you, you left as a separation but you never really left. You can just leave. And just right then I calmed down immediately. It was just like I knew I had to leave because it, nothing would change him.

And so she did, but still had to remain in contact with him after the divorce for the sake of her children. Teresa described a time in her marriage when she was ready to leave, but her husband’s words reminded her just how difficult it would be:

And I swear to God, I was going to do it that night, and I don’t know. I don’t have a reason as why I continued to stay with him and I don’t know if it was because of the years of ‘you can’t make it on your own. You have no schooling. You’ll, uh, nobody will have you. You’re a crazy bitch.’

Teresa discussed how ashamed she felt after beginning to internalize his hurtful words because she worried about the example she was setting for her daughters and she did not want to let her parents and family down because she was failing as a wife and mother. She admits feeling embarrassed and horrible about herself and often wonders if the grass is any greener on the other side of this life:
Is the grass greener? I think it has to do with age you know because you’re not 30 anymore and you know your mind don’t think that way. Um… I guess I just have to be a little bit more confident. I don’t have that all back yet. I don’t think I ever was confident. It shows in my work. I could’ve always been a lot better. I could’ve always done things. I could’ve went back to school, you know? I probably still can. But then again, I’m not there yet. I’m not that confident yet because I’ve been always told, ‘you can’t do that. Why do you need to do that? What for? Oh for what, yourself, oh so you can feel good about yourself?’ That’s not a, not comprehensible to him. ‘What, you wanna feel good about yourself? You gonna go do this cleansing of your mind?’ He thinks it’s a bunch of bullshit.

Compared with the younger women I spoke with, these three older women had more years invested in their marriages and families, fewer opportunities to seek out education and job skills, and more pronounced lack of self-esteem, shame, and embarrassment due to years of abuses from their former partners. As we will see in the following section, women’s communities and society in general plays a huge role in their decision-making process as well.

Period Effects: A Sign of the Times?

And there’s a whole bunch of us out there because we come from, I don’t know if it’s just our age, um, well evidently, if it’s 40 years plus, but like I said before, it all you know the generation before you did not believe in divorce. My mom and dad and they’re old school about everything. It makes a difference on how you outlook and sum up your marriage and your life and how you’re gonna approach things and how your gonna solve your problems because it’s completely different now. It’s easy to walk away. I don’t wanna say it’s easy but you see more of it. Now, whether the women are getting stronger or um, the men are getting weaker maybe? – Rhonda

Period effects embody the influence of the socio-historic events and circumstances that are external to the individual. The older women I spoke with were born between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s and thus were growing up during a time of widespread social, legal, political, and economic changes in U.S. history. The second-wave feminist, battered women’s, and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, along with the elder abuse movement of the 1980s and 1990s introduced changes in policies, laws, and practices that served to increase public awareness of and diminish societal tolerance for familial violence (Zink et al., 2003). Even though these women were coming of age during a time of change for the broader society, we must still keep in mind the small rural communities in which they grew up and remained in for most of their lives, as discussed
previously throughout this dissertation. These movements, although very much alive and present for most of the country, often seemed delayed in reaching these particular rural areas of the country. It has been said that ideologies are the biggest obstacles to stand in the way of change and this seems to be the perfect characterization for the small towns in which these women live. In fact, most women interviewed a decade ago, as well as most I interviewed recently, have commented on the slow tide of change in their communities. The point of differentiation between the younger and older group of women I spoke with is the socio-historical period in which they were born, matured, married, and experienced abuse. For the first half of the older women’s lives, the general societal non-recognition of abuse, the ever-present notion of strict gender roles that define women’s obligation to marriage and family, and the perceived lack of socially accepted options for women experiencing abuse compelled many women to go back to their husbands and keep the peace in their families.

Despite evidence of a feminist movement in the peripheral view, the women I spoke with lived in an area of rural America that seemed reluctant to recognize woman abuse, especially if it was not that “Lifetime movie” abuse discussed previously. In fact, women’s inabilities to name their experiences as abusive and have other’s recognize it as such was a key component in many women’s stay-leave decisions. Joyce admitted that it took awhile for her to consider herself as having been abused because she didn’t think the sexual abuse “qualified” and was still attempting to negotiate these definitions with her therapist five years after her divorce. Teresa also discussed how the meaning of “sexual assault” had changed for her throughout the years:

...And knowing the meaning now of “sexually assaulted” and the meaning when I was young, it’s changed um, because back then when we said no, we were just being a bitch about it...Yea, you didn’t have a reason, and if you were considered a whore, you know, you knew it didn’t matter. I knew one girl in high school who was gang-banged at a party and no one helped her. And the police was called and they didn’t believe her. The boys didn’t get in trouble because they were from the better part of the town and they were the ‘high society’ part of the town...that was in the early 70s.

I asked the women if they felt if sexual assault and domestic violence were problems in their community. Each of the older women made the distinction between the past and present, a finding unique to this group. Joyce responded:
Right now? In some cases, yes. In my case, I don't think it's a problem right now. But in the past? Um, yes definitely. I think in my age group in the 1980s there was a lot of sex going on and there was quite a lot of coercion going on…I mean… I think it went both ways but when I was a teenager and young adult, men, you know, they wanted to score and get laid and count it as a success. And you know even now at work when I, when guys talk, they, they um, they still think the same thing.

Teresa also recalled the difference between the past and present regarding abuse in her community:

Yeah, I think back in the day that it was, you know, it was not spoken of if it happened to you. You were supposed to be quiet about it. If it happened to your sister, you weren’t supposed to tell anybody. Um, if you go to the police back then, they didn’t do anything about it and now, nowadays, they’re making sure there’s support and there’s you know, for the health and the safety of individuals involved, you know? I think there’s a lot of help out there now compared to what it used to be…but back then, we didn’t go into detail except if you had a very best friend that you could tell.

These women faced difficulties in convincing themselves and others in the community that their experiences “qualified” as abuse, thus their experiences were often discounted and they were told by many, especially their families, to return home to their husbands to ‘make it work.’ As Teresa asserted, “my mom and dad were the old fashioned type. You work it out if you can. My mom said, ‘Oh it’ll be okay. It’s just, those things happen.’”

When Marie left her abusive husband she went to her dad for help:

I just, one day I left and I went and stayed with my dad and my step-mom and they told me that I had to go back because they don’t want me stayin’ there anymore. I needed to go back to my husband. That was what I was supposed to do. I was his wife.

Joyce’s parents seemed to take two different stances and she admits that her mom had to follow in line with her father’s wishes because “that’s the way it was” in their home too:

If somebody in my community had really um acknowledged what I was going through…I, you know my dad understood but he was sick and she made it hard for me to live at home. He wanted me to go back. He didn’t want to have to deal with me going through divorce and having three kids at home…I think, you know, after I had my miscarriage, I tried to move home and my mother was really upset but my dad kind of pushed me into getting married and he offered to give me the car to get married. My mother knew what was wrong and she tried to be supportive but and she even had said that if we had gotten you into counseling back then. And I would have if I was open to the idea.
All three women discussed the strict gender roles that had been enforced in their homes as children, defining their functions as wives and mothers with an obligation to their husband and their marriage at all costs. The irony here is that there did not seem to be a notion of generational violence at play in the women’s lives as they claim their parents would argue, but they never witnessed any violence. Marie explains:

Yes and my brother he comes out and he looked at me and they had just never seen anything like that before because my family is not like that. They don’t drink uh, they fought, you know? They’d get in their arguments and slam doors and break dishes and things like that but I don’t think anybody was physical.

Teresa echoes Marie’s notion of a happy childhood but admits that her older sister was also in a very abusive marriage characterized also by patriarchal assumptions:

…Except my sister had a bad relationship with her husband and she’s still married to him. Um, and he was quite a drinker too, um, and he probably cheated on her and she got the crap beat outta her because he was a turn-the-tables-type guy too. It was always the woman’s fault. It was never theirs. They’re doing all right. They’re the man. But for those years, I knew what was happening to my sister and I would go up and visit her and I’d witness him and I would get so mad and that’s why he never liked me growin up because, I mean we’re six years apart, and I would get in the middle of them and I wasn’t afraid and I would fight him and you know, jump on his back when he would go af...

This generational gendered ideology upheld the notion that the women’s mothers and other women in the family “stuck it out” so it dictated that they should do the same. Their role as a good wife and mother included holding the family together and keeping the peace, as we have seen demonstrated earlier in previous chapters. Like Joyce, many women (on account of their families’ pressure) did not see divorce as an option:

You could say that I was from a more traditional family where divorce just wasn’t accepted. You got married and that was forever, through good times and bad, no matter what. Mom would always say, ‘you just go and make it work honey and it will get better.’ But it never got better and we had kids so it was hard. So eventually I stopped trying to leave because I knew what everyone would tell me ‘just stick it out.’

This was the morally and socially “acceptable” route for many women, especially with children, in abusive marriages at the time. In fact, there were not many other options available for these women. Teresa explains it best:
It was easier for us to stay to be able to live, to function, to give our kids what they needed, to put them in preschool cause it costs money, than to leave and not have anything and be that, because it wasn’t that common back then to be the single mom. There wasn’t that much help for us back then. They had WIC but what was WIC back then? I mean it’s not like it is now. You may have gotten your formula when they were babies but nothing after that. You didn’t get vegetables and all that stuff so really, unless you were willing to be dependent on your family, which my mom and dad was done raising kids. He didn’t have enough income to keep us too, although they both told me ‘our house is open to you, but I think you need to try to work it out.’ It was the old fashioned way to do it. Now, if I was 25 right now and that would’ve happened, you bet your sweet ass I’d have left.

Teresa believes that if there were available and accessible resources that could have assisted her and her children in leaving her abusive husband 25 years ago, she would have run out the door and never looked back. But because she, like the other older women I spoke with in the back-talk study, was living in the 1980s in a small rural community that lacked fundamental resources to help women and children and held similar conservative views about women and their roles within the family domain, she survived in silence, isolation, and often alone.

Aging Effects: Does Leaving Equal Happiness?

Aging effects are the consequence of chronological time or physical age changes and the influences of development internal to the individual (Jagodzinski, 1984; Menard, 1992; Robinson & Jackson, 2001). Of the research that has been conducted on older women’s experience with abuse in their intimate relationships, most have found that aging effects prove to limit options for women in abusive relationships, becoming another reason women give for staying (Buchbinder & Winterstein, 2003; Mears, 2003; Montminy, 2005; Schaffer, 1999; Wilke and Vinton, 2005; Winterstein, 2006; Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2005, 2009; Zink et al., 2003, 2006). Health challenges and physical limitations are only one reality in the lives of our aging population and women often stay due to their own health issues or for the care of their ailing partner. There is also a common finding that the physical and sexual abuse may decrease with age among older women, but the mental and emotional abuse continues and sometimes escalates (Harris, 1996; Rennison and Rand, 2003; Zink et al., 2006). Finally, loneliness due to
isolation and the fear of loneliness proved to be a more pronounced theme among older women.

Only one of the older women I spoke with discussed staying in relationship due in part to her husband’s failing health. Teresa explains why she believes they are both still married to each other:

I think his health has a lot to do with it now. He’s not in good health. Um, we don’t have what you call an intimate relationship anymore. Because of his health and his lifestyle is, you know, he still drinks a lot. And I think he knows that I don’t care. And I think he’s just…I think he’s what I was back then. Right now, I think he thinks that, I’m just here cause I gotta place to come home to. He’s happy right now. He’s not very happy about his health and he’s not very happy about his sex life right now, but he’s still doing what he wants to do. He’s still working and he’s still drinking and he’s still socializing, not as much as he used to because he will help the kids. And he will be around, whether there’s a picnic or a ballgame or something like that, but there’s always that beer in that car…Separate lives under the same roof ya know? But I don’t think he realizes that. I think he thinks that it’s the way it’s always been. That he’ll come home on a Friday night and I’ll have supper on the table for him.

And she normally does have his dinner ready when he gets home. I asked her why she still does this and she responded: “Well, I don’t know. I guess it’s, for me, I don’t think I deserve anything else because I’m really afraid to go out there and start it all over again. My God, I’m 57 years old!”

Once again, the self-esteem, shame and embarrassment issues creep up again, in part due to the replacement of the physical and sexual abuses with the mental and emotional abuses. Although the physical and sexual abuse for Joyce never stopped until she divorced her husband, Marie and Teresa noted that they saw a change. Marie recalls:

Towards the end the hitting stopped and he just got real ugly. He would call me awful names and put me down. I cried a lot. I started to believe him. I gained a lot of weight and turned to the bottle for relief, to drown out his ugly, nasty words. There were days I just wished he would hit me so I didn’t have to hear him call me fat, ugly, bitch, stupid. I could heal easier from bruises and broken bones. It has taken me a long time to get over some of it. Actually, I don’t think I really am now even.

Teresa adds:

I’ll never get past some of the rotten things he did or how he treated me but it’s easier when he’s not that way now. Do you know what I mean? That he hasn’t been recently in the past few years, he hasn’t been. You know, he gets upset;
everybody gets mad and has disagreements. I know that, like I told you before, I walk away, and he’ll walk away.

Teresa admits the verbal abuse still happens but talked about how she has it under control now:

The verbal, it still happens but I think I gotta handle on it…You know you try all kinds of different things. You try to out-do them sometimes and you try to go crazy on them too to show that you can go crazy too and sometimes that worked you know? No, it doesn’t escalate that far anymore.

When I asked her why she believes it doesn’t escalate anymore, she pointed to age:

I don’t know if it has to do with age or not but maybe we’re just too tired for it. Yeah, I guess that we’re aged out. I guess that it doesn’t get you anywhere anyway. And we’re always gonna have our differences you know? He’s gonna say black and I’m gonna say white!

As previously discussed in prior chapters, fear is a very real emotion that factors daily into the stay-leave decisions of many women in abusive relationships. Like many women discussed ten years ago, as well as all of the women I interviewed, fear of the unknown was a common reason given for choosing to stay in their relationships. For the older women I spoke with, this fear was tied to loneliness and played a huge role in the apprehensions of leaving. Marie reluctantly admits: “I just was scared to be alone. I didn’t necessarily want to be with him, getting beat up all the time, but I didn’t want to be by myself either. I guess I wasn’t strong enough at the time.” The fear of “starting over” was a prominent theme that differentiated these women from the younger group of women I spoke with. Joyce recalls having this conversation in her head in the weeks leading up to her filing for divorce:

And I thought to myself, man, you are really going to do this? How are you going to do this? You have three kids, not much money, barely any education that will get you to be able to get the job to provide for these three kids and you will have to basically start all over. Starting over scared the shit out of me because I had always been in a relationship. I had never been single, not once in my whole life. And now I was going to not only be single, but divorced! And with three kids! Yeah, I looked like a real catch!

After a three hour conversation with Teresa, we spent the last hour discussing her fears and what it would take to find happiness. She clearly pointed to the notion that staying in
her abusive relationship for nearly 40 years did not bring her happiness, so I asked if she thought leaving would:

Hmm…depends on what year you’d ask me! Because honestly it really does change because your views change, your attitudes change. When you change and your lifestyle changes from year to year or periodically, your views change. I don’t care who ya are. You go with what you’re into at that point, you know? See, that’s what I’m scared of because I’m not fully content but I’m ok… but if I leave, I mean sure, I think of all these things. There would be more time for me. I could get out there but I’m just not, like I said, that goes back to the promise. There’s no promises out there that it’s gonna be better. That it’s gonna be happier. That it’s gonna be more fulfilling. That you’re gonna get outta your depression, you’re gonna get out of your routine…I’ve got a good job. I’m ok. I don’t need anybody. My kids are ok. I don’t have to worry about them anymore. They’ve got their own lives. Um, as far as him, I’ve come to the realization that he’s gonna make it. He’d make it if I would leave… I always told myself, I’m not gonna leave because I’m not done yet and I don’t know what that quite meant. I still haven’t figured it out. I was close to leaving when I was; I think I would feel better leaving with myself if there wasn’t a reason. Because every time I think there’s a reason, it doesn’t happen and I’m the one that doesn’t let it happen. I could’ve gotten into another relationship and I could’ve left and I don’t know what’s keeping me from leavin. I’m just; I’m just not there yet.

Fear of the unknown, of being lonely, of the promises that no one can keep in regards their better, brighter future, kept Teresa and Marie in their abusive relationships until death forced them to face their fears. Now as widows, they are forced into a new life, a new routine, but not yet free from loss, grief, and loneliness. During a recent phone call from Teresa, she reminded me that she can’t give up because after all, “I am mother and I still have to take care of my kids, especially now!”

MOTHERHOOD MATTERS

Research estimates more than 40% of couples experiencing intimate partner violence have children under the age of 18 living in the home (Cerulli et al., 2003; Gjelsvik et al., 2003), 95% of whom are the biological children of the IPV victim (Fantuzzo and Fusco, 2007). In fact, Rhodes and colleagues (2010) estimate that approximately 15.5 million children live in households rife with domestic violence and due to the common underreporting of violence by victims, this number may be an underestimate as well. Despite four decades of work on domestic violence, limited research has investigated specifically the issue of mothering in the context of domestic violence and there is an absence of empirical study focused on women’s experiences of mothering in this
particular context (Geffner et al., 2000; Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001, Letourneau et al., 2007; Lapierre, 2010; Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2010). However, a number of researchers have highlighted that men’s violence against women does create a situation that complicates women’s abilities to mother (Stark and Flitcraft, 1988; Kelly, 1994; Hester and Radford, 1996; Radford and Hester, 2001, 2006). But despite this recognition, most research in this area still neglects to question the underlying burden of responsibility that is automatically placed upon women as mothers in the context of their violent relationships. This neglect may be seen in part from the challenges stemming from the interaction between the particular context created by the violence and the broader institution of motherhood that places women in a Catch-22. Women are expected to protect their children from violence at all costs, which often calls for them to end their intimate relationships (Hester and Radford, 1996; Johnson and Sullivan, 2008) but women who are deemed unwilling or unable to stop the violence or to leave are seen as failing to protect their children and may have their children removed by the State (Humphreys, 1999; Johnson and Sullivan, 2008; Strega et al., 2008). In fact, Mullender (1996), in an overview of social work responses, contends that in the late 1980s, the popular expectation was that women should stay in their abusive relationships for the sake of their children; yet a decade later, women were expected to leave in order to protect their children. Regardless of the societal expectations for mothers experiencing abuse in their relationships, these notions hinge on the problem of male violence as defined in terms of women’s failures as mothers rather than in terms of men’s violence (Strega et al., 2008) and fail to take into account the context of motherhood and the difficulties and threats women face when they attempt to be “good” mothers.

Most of the 43 women interviewed in the original Ohio study had children and eight of the twelve women I interviewed had at least one child in the home at the time they experienced violence in their relationship. Echoing the results of the secondary data analysis, many mothers I spoke with in the back-talk study indicated a multitude of ways their children influenced their stay-leave decision making process. Their stories highlight the continuous and oftentimes conflicting struggle to function as good mothers in the midst of the ever-present violence in their lives. Although all the mothers I spoke with desired to protect their children and keep them safe, much like the mothers in the original
Ohio study, the role of the institution of motherhood and the attendant consequences of conforming to the social expectations of ‘good mother’ often lead to their mothering coming under attack, thus resulting in the overwhelming feelings of the loss of control over their mothering abilities. Mothers had to face very real Catch-22s that kept them in a constant state of negotiating the realities of living with and leaving the violence that affected themselves and their children.

*Keeping Family Together: Keeping the Secret, Keeping the Peace*

Throughout history and in most societies, women have been deemed responsible for the care and protection of their children. In Western societies in particular, this societal directive is buttressed by social constructions of the image of the “good mother” – a woman with total devotion to and an instinctive ability and desire to give, care for, and to sacrifice for her children at all costs (Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2004). Many radical feminist writers have demonstrated how social constructions of the “good mother” and “ideal motherhood” accommodate the essential components of a patriarchal society that rejects alternative stances and functions as a means for controlling and isolating women within their homes (Rich, 1976, Braverman, 1989; Hays, 1996). Even with the noteworthy influence of feminist thought and practice, Western social conceptions of mothering are still impacted by the motherhood myth and the expectation follows that mothers are to bear most of the responsibility for the emotional and physical care, safety, and well-being of children (Warner, 2005; Peled and Gil, 2011).

All of the mothers I spoke with in the back-talk study deemed it was mainly their responsibility and duty to be a good mother by putting the children first, caring for them, and ultimately protecting them from violence. Like the women interviewed ten years ago, many of the women I spoke with developed strategies to protect their children while attempting to negotiate stay-leave decisions in their abusive relationships. Heather became good at reading her husband in order to protect herself and her children:

> Cause there were times when you had to just zip it in order to make it stop, you had to play dead sometimes. Pretend that you couldn’t walk, um, pretend it didn’t bother you, you weren’t gonna argue back, walking on eggshells just to appease him. So it was a combination of both depending on what the situation was and how far I could go. Because I could read him, I could tell when it was comin. And you learn to read em and you learn to um, know how far you can take an argument. You know what words to say and what not. You know what to bring up
and what not. Rehashin’ the past of um, whatever may be the last fight is not a good thing. You learn those things. It’s just like the ‘live and learn’ thing. Oh ‘been there, done that, not gonna do that again.’ You know, or I can get away with it to this point, you know. It’s what you do for your kids.

Like Heather, Vicky often found herself ‘walking on eggshells’ and ‘holding her tongue’ to avoid violent outbursts in front of the children:

I had to be careful. I learned his trigger points and which buttons not to push, especially in front of the kids. They learned to walk on eggshells right along with me. When they heard his truck pull up after work, they ran to their rooms to make sure they were clean and didn’t come out until dinnertime. They were kids, young kids and they should’ve been able to live like kids, you know? Yell and play, but we couldn’t when he was home. He would say or do somethin’ that would just piss me off to high heaven but I would just sit and take it cause he wouldn’t be afraid to throw the dinner on me right in front of them. I didn’t want them to see that.

Marcie found herself constantly distracting her children from her husband’s violence in an attempt to shield them from the abuse:

I would always have to come up with games for them to play outside or turn up the TV or music player real loud so they wouldn’t hear us fighting. I didn’t want them to see it so I would do everything to take them away from it. I knew when it was coming on so I would think fast and have the big one take the little one out on an adventure or scavenger hunt. I got good at it so I would think of these games they could play for when he got home. They probably thought I was the coolest mom ever but I just didn’t want them to see the awful shit he was doing to me!

Many of the women also discussed the isolation they felt in their roles as mothers, even though many worked outside the home. Isolation existed as an important feature that reinforced the sense of sole responsibility for the children in many women. Janie explains:

I worked all day and even went to school three days a week but when I came home, he went to the garage and it was all on me to do everything – clean the house, cook the dinner, help the kids with their homework, get them ready for bed…By the end of the night, I was so exhausted I didn’t have the energy to anything else. I didn’t have time to hang out with friends or go to the mall. I had children to take care of. I was a mom. That was my life.

Besides the social isolation, many women avoided discussing the violence against them with others or around their children. Linda recalls:
I never wanted them to know so I just wouldn’t talk about it around them. My friend would call me on the phone and I wanted to tell someone so bad but I was never not around my kids so I just waited. That is why it was so shocking to everyone when I finally did leave, because I never got a chance to tell anyone what was happening because I was afraid they would hear.

When I asked Linda what she was afraid of, she responded:

First, that they would be afraid that he would do it to them. Maybe that they would tell him and try to defend me you know? And then that would be very bad for everyone. Maybe they would tell someone else and I would have to figure out how to keep the secret. Yeah, keep the secret to keep the peace…it was a full-time job!

In addition to the concentrated attempts at keeping the secret to keep the peace, and ultimately to keep the family together, women’s stories about motherhood also exposed many ways that their mothering was used as a target in their abusive relationships.

*Mothering as a Target*

Women’s roles as mothers has often been found to come under direct attack by their violent intimate partners in a multitude of ways (Bancroft and Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008; Lapierre, 2010). Using mothering as a target is a means for many men to express authority and control in their relationships and demonstrates women’s inability to protect children and themselves. As the secondary analysis uncovered, a few women spoke of being coerced by their husbands into having abortions, being repeatedly forced to maintain unwanted pregnancies, and suffering miscarriages at the hands of their violent male partners. Leslie echoed this finding when discussing how the violence in her marriage increased after her pregnancy:

Things switched after I got pregnant. He got worse. Cause it was like, and then he’d threaten me, you know, he destroyed the house one time, like kicked holes through the wall, kicked glass out of the entertainment stand and kicked the glass out of the front door and I was hyperventilating and crying and then he told me, ‘if you miscarry with my child, I will shoot you.’

When I asked Julie to talk about when she tried to leave her husband for the second time, she responded:

I was pregnant. Yeah, my oldest son was um, was two when my second son was born and he backed off for awhile after my first son was born and then he just started back in with a vengeance, like he missed it. I’m pretty positive my second son was conceived during one of those times. I, I, it doesn't make any difference
to how I feel about my son at all but, but just the thought that, the whole thought
that that happened that I conceived a baby like that, it just made me sick. Um, and
I wanted to be away from him.

Julie’s decision to attempt to leave to ensure the safety of her son and her unborn
child resulted in more violence against her. She admits trying to shield the violence from
her children but sometimes was unable to:

My husband took me into a room to talk to me and shut the door and started
calling me names and saying nasty stuff to me and I had a bottle of milk in my
hand and I just took and dumped it on his head. And he shoved me on the bed,
started unzipping his pants and undoing is buckle and I told him, I looked him
straight in the eye and said ‘if you rape me right now I will kill you and I meant
it.’ Momentarily, I mean I don't think I that if I tried I could actually go through
with something like that but, um, he saw that I was serious and he quit. And my
oldest son witnessed all of that through the keyhole in the door.

Like Julie, Debbie also attempted to shield the violence from her children and protect
them and her unborn baby, prompting her decision to leave yet again:

I was seven or eight months pregnant and he came home drunk and we were
arguing and my oldest daughter was yelling, ‘please stop, please stop’ and I told
her to go in her room and I’d be in in a minute. I went into the bedroom to get
something and he knocked me down on the bed and I did get away and I shut the
door. So ‘I thought, ok it’s all right, he’s drunk, he passed out.’ So I went to my
other daughter and said, to my oldest daughter, and I said ‘it’s ok, I’m gonna
come in and sleep with you in a little bit. I just wanna make sure that he’s asleep.’
So I went in and I went to bed and just laid there and thought, ‘ok he’s asleep.’ I
just wanted to make sure he’s out. I was trying to get in to hide the gun, to hide
his keys. I didn’t want him taking off and driving again because I was always
paranoid with him getting picked up and I had been up all night and I was
pregnant so I had fallen asleep on the bed waiting for him to fall asleep and when
I woke up, he was on top of me. He was chokin me. And I was screaming ‘wake
up, wake up, what are you doing! What are you doing?’ He got up and he went
like he was running off the bed and he ran straight through the wall and there was
a huge hole in the wall and he came back and he just kept smackin me and hittin
me. ‘Where’s my keys, where’s my keys?’ and the only thing I could think of
was give him his keys! So I reached over and I gave him his keys and if he threw
the keys once at me, he threw them 20 times…I was goin back and forth tryin to
get outta the bedroom and he would grab me each time and he would throw me
back on the bed. I was eight months pregnant! I finally got away and all this time
I could hear my other daughter screamin and cryin and I, the only thing I could
think of was ‘get the hell outta that room’ and I got in her room, no I pulled her
outta her room and we ran in the bathroom and I locked the door. And we stayed
in there all night waiting for him either to leave or to pass out and when I got up
the next day, that’s the other time I left.
Leslie adds her husband’s violence was a reason to leave but she stayed to ensure the safety of her baby:

I know one time, like he was yellin at me and broke a chai[r in the kitchen and she woke up and started crying and he grabbed her and he wouldn’t let me hold her and she is screaming and she was only probably maybe five months old and he was sittin there holdin her and he told me to get back, cause I was in the computer room, he’s like, ‘just get back to your fuckin work’ and he was holdin her sayin ‘your mom’s a fuckin retard, I wish I could go shove her head through the fuckin computer right now.’ While he’s holding her and I just sat in there and cried cause there was nothing I could do cause he didn’t want me to turn around a look at him. He didn’t want me to touch her. He just wanted me to sit in there and I was scared for her…and so I stayed.

A few of the women I spoke with in the back-talk study did share incidents of physical violence perpetrated by their partners to their children. Marie recalls that her husband got physical with her teenage daughter one time:

Um, he, I think maybe the last straw too around that time, around what maybe 15 years ago maybe, um, we got in an argument and my daughter got into it tried to break it up and when he physically got up and threw her against the wall, I wanted to call the police. His brother came up and I asked him to take him outta the house before I called the police and I don’t know why, I guess it was because I never seen it any good to it.

Marie admits that she ‘probably should have done something’ but she was worried that by calling the police, they would take her daughters away from her because she “let him get rough with her.” She thinks that was the only time her husband was physically abusive towards her children but believes his abuse took on a more verbal nature when concerning her daughters:

He would, well, I think as far as discipline or getting mad at them, no I don’t think so. I think that’s the first time I seen it physically. Verbally, yes. Verbally, making um putting demands on them, ‘you will not go out with that boy’ things like that, just things like that. Um, you know, makin him sound like the tough guy even though he was the father of two girls, he still had to be “tough” you know?

Gina also spoke about how she witnessed the emotional abuse her husband committed toward her girls:

I think that there’s mental, or emotional. Um, cause he used to do it to me. I, I know there is and he doesn’t understand that making somebody feel bad for not getting you a can of coke because you won’t get up and go get it yourself, is not, that you don’t make people feel bad because of that. You know, you just don’t
and he would do that. He will make them feel bad about doing something so pathetic.

Many women in the talk-back study also spoke of their partners using threats of violence towards their children to undermine their mothering. Leslie remembers:

One time, I guess when I went back to work after my first son was born, um, I came home one day and he told me he couldn’t babysit them anymore because he was afraid he might kill them. And he denies saying stuff to me like that now. He doesn't remember it but I remember it like it was yesterday. And I didn't really think that he would, I, at the time I thought that maybe there were moments when the baby was crying when he felt like he might kill them but he didn't and he didn't shake them and he didn't hurt them that I know of.

Leslie also spoke about a fear that he may abuse their young daughter:

Yes, she was one when we divorced and he told me that when she was one, he said you're going to think that I'm going to abuse her and, and there is nothing that I will be able to say to convince you otherwise. He was already convinced that that was going to happen... It's like he wrote off… He tried to be a father to her but they just, she was one when we left and I believe that I facilitated them be connected. I did have mistrust of him and um, but I still, she still was there for her custody.

Threats to leave and take children, or to not bring them back after a visit, were also targets at women’s ability to mother and protect and played a huge role into stay-leave decisions of the women I spoke with. Gina admits that she was concerned that her husband may have taken her daughter:

I didn’t know if he ever would. That was my fear. I don’t think he ever would’ve intentionally, but it wouldn’t have shocked me if he would’ve like taken off with her in the truck while he had been drinking, you know?

Leslie adds:

After she was born it got like to the point where I you know, he would threaten me with her. Like, ‘if you leave, if you do this, if you try and take my daughter away, I will take her from you.’ Not legally, but he would take her from me.

Kim’s fear and anxiety over her husband’s threat eventually paved the way for her escape:

A lot of threats. I wouldn’t let him keep the kids for a while…I was really just, I didn’t trust him. Not at all. I still don’t trust him. It always played in the back of my mind that he would take them and never give them back and it would be a huge fight and I didn’t want them to be a part of a huge fight. So I um I went to
my mom’s and I took the girls with me and they thought that was a slumber party so…[her youngest daughter] was so little, she really didn’t know what was going on but [her oldest daughter] had a really hard time.

Many of the women I interviewed in the talk-back study reaffirmed the experiences of women interviewed a decade ago concerning their partner’s strategies of mother-blaming. Many women spoke of how their partners continuously referred to them as bad mothers, blaming them for the violence they ‘caused’ and thus exposed their children to. Vicky reported:

He always said that I was a bad mother and I was going to ruin my kids because I let them see me get hit. Like it was my fault and he thought it was. He said I would push his buttons to the point of no return. He called me fat, stupid, a bad mom. He even threatened to call CPS cause I was going to make them fat because I was a bad cook.

Like Vicky, Maggie recalls how her husband would incite the children against her, denigrating her mothering skills:

After a big fight, he would be the one to comfort the children while I was cleaning up. One time I heard him tell them that ‘Mommy has problems and she is just really really emotional. She can’t take care of you right now.’ No, I can’t take care of them because you just strangled me in the bedroom because I told you I didn’t want to have sex while the children were awake! No, I can’t take care of you because I am trying to stop my nose from bleeding and cover up my big huge black eye! He would try to get them to side with him and one day my son told me not to ‘push it with Daddy cause you will just end up gettin hurt.’ I wasn’t even sure if he knew what that meant but I did and I knew exactly where it was coming from.

As these women’s mothering came under attack, they began to feel as if they were losing an uphill battle, losing control all together, and many feared for the example they were setting for their daughters.

*Losing Control over Mothering*

I have previously discussed the numerous consequences on the mental and physical health of women who experience violence in their intimate relationships and these consequences make mothering daily difficult. More than half of the mothers I spoke with discussed their experiences with depression or “breakdowns” as a result of the abuse in their relationships that directly affected the women’s ability to care for and protect their children. Jill discussed a time when she was at her lowest:
And then I tried that when I started trying to live with it. And work around it but then I started getting delusional because, you know, it was always something to justify it and I was getting delusional and I eventually started getting suicidal and I think eight years into the marriage and after three children I found myself sitting on the bathroom floor one day sobbing and realized that I wanted it all to end right then and there. I just was trying to think of a way just to end everything. But I couldn’t, I had my kids.

Although every woman I spoke with wanted the violence to end, some women fantasized about ending it all together, but then “snapped back into reality” because they were mothers. Peggy recalls:

I had been thinking a lot about suicide (and) up to that point I didn’t think about it. I think I thought about it after I left because I remember going to my therapist and asked her to put me in the hospital because I just couldn’t deal with being a single mother raising three kids…. I have never ever been all the way there. That one day was the closest that I’ve ever been…. It isn’t me. It's not a place I ever want to be again.

Lisa adds:

I knew where he kept the guns and I knew how to use them. It is terrible but I did think of it. Every time he raped me, hit me, knocked me down, threaten my babies, I thought of it. It was either gonna be him or me! But what would happen to my babies? I would be no use to them in jail or dead, so I better find a Plan B.

Plan B for Lisa was a very long and arduous process of planning her exit, but after six years of marriage and two children, she did leave for good, but not without the fear of still not being able to provide for her children without the financial backing of their father.

As previously demonstrated in both the secondary data analysis and the talk-back analysis, many women in both studies expressed concern for their children in the sense of actually or potentially losing control of financial means to care for their children. Recall Rhonda’s reliance on her husband to provide the material things her daughters may not have otherwise had if she had decided to leave him:

I could sit here and say that I did it for my kids. My kids were my world back then, that I wanted them to have the things… I wanted them to have, to be in sports and have the clothes and have the shoes that everybody else had and the only way I could do that was because of him.
Stacey also talked about how her financial dependence on her husband influenced her decisions to stay as it simply became her normal:

I didn’t like to work when my kids were little, um, and I couldn’t work. I couldn’t afford it because he had control of the money. He would give me some money to put in the bank to pay the bills, just enough to pay the bills, um, and sitters were high so I wanted to stay home with my kids so that’s what I did. Most of their earlier years, I was home with them. And I think that’s a lot of, a lot of the problem that I was dependent on him because I knew I didn’t have to be with him five days out of the week or maybe even ten days out of the week. So and it seems like a long time, and at times it drug, but at times I don’t know where the years went because it just a norm.

Finally, every mother I spoke with reaffirmed a similar concern of many of the mothers interviewed a decade ago in regards to setting a good example for their children. A number of women were worried that the presence of violence itself and the length of time their children were exposed to this violence consequentially deemed them with a victim status that prevented them from being positive role models. They often expressed feelings of guilt and hypocrisy because they were not “strong enough” to leave or to leave earlier. Judy carries this guilt and regret and feels as though her two grown daughters look down on her for choosing to stay with her abusive husband:

If there’s only one thing I regret, actually was not leaving sooner, earlier to make um, I really never thought of living for me. I’ve always thought about living for my kids. And now, you’re taught to live for yourself because you can’t give anything to anyone else if you don’t love yourself and um, I you know, do good things for yourself and make positive decisions for yourself and that’s one thing I regret because I think that my kids um, kind of look down upon me because I stayed as long as I did and continue to stay, um, because I really can’t tell them a reason why.

Judy has not been able to pinpoint one reason as to why she has stayed in her 30 year marriage, yet is beginning to believe that she did teach her girls something through her experience:

I think uh…they were more cautious of the relationships they chose to be in. Um because of that fact. I think they, what makes me feel good is I think that they are so much stronger than I was when they seen something that wasn’t right, that wasn’t going right, that was leadin down a wrong path with them, they got out. They ended it. So if there was one lesson to learn, I think they both learned it.
Judy’s epiphany was one shared by most of the women I spoke with, especially those raising daughters. This discussion about setting an example for mothers of daughters was an emergent theme that stood out when compared to the findings in the original study. The women in the talk-back study who were raising girls spoke more directly about the impact that their abusive relationship may have on their daughters. Christy expressed her desire to end the cycle of violence with her:

It’s always scary raising girls and boys both for that matter. I want my boy to be raised as a gentleman, to teach him right from wrong, that it’s not acceptable to hit or lay a hand on a woman. And to raise my girl not to put up with what I did. And at the same time I am nervous about them ending up and carrying on that cycle because they talk about this generational cycle of violence ya know? This idea that you see mom get hit, you end up being in relationships like that because girls tend to seek out guys like their fathers. I just hope and pray to God this ends with me.

When I asked Gina about her main concerns for her children, she also hoped her two girls would learn by the example she said:

I’m just glad my girls didn’t go down that way. They uh, I think they’ve learned. They’ve seen it and I think honestly, even though they don’t understand and didn’t understand why mom stayed…I don’t actually remember if there was a time that I sat down with them and said, ‘please if anybody tries to hit you or abuse you’ cause I didn’t think I had to. I think that I insinuated a lot, ‘oooh, that’s not good’ and I think they had friends of theirs that were having bad relationships, even as early as high school, um and uh I noticed my daughter would step in and say, ‘this isn’t right, get away from him’ so I knew that she had her head in the right place and would not, there’s just no excuse, there’s no, you know, I will NOT put up with that.

Dee, another mother of two young girls, told me that she would finally break the silence about their father when the time was right, hoping they would learn from her experience:

I think once I see them getting in a serious relationship and they can fully understand ya know the true meaning behind everything, I think is when that talk will come. And it’s not to screw their father whatsoever. It’s just, I want them to know that it is NOT ok to put up with it and that they don’t have to cause I don’t want them to. I don’t want them to be me now.

Gloria also related a similar hope for her young daughter:

I don’t have to tell her the bad things that happened but best believe that if I see her getting into a similar situation when she’s older, it’s comin out. I’m not going to let her go through what I went through and yeah, you gotta learn life lessons but I am going to try to teach her at a young age. You don’t have to rely on
somebody else. You don’t have to be dependable on a man or anyone, you know, you can be independent and strong and not put up with the things I put up with but I won’t put up with again.

The various strategies used by men to attack mothers and their mothering are often carried out successfully because they take place within the institution of motherhood, which posits women as solely responsible for the care and protection of their children, while at the same time commanding a specific array of expectations to be the “good mother” (Lapierre, 2010). Mullander and colleagues (2002, 158) assert:

It is not an accident that abusive men attack women’s abilities to mother, they know that this represents a source of positive identity, the thing above all else that abused women try to preserve, and also that it is an area of vulnerability.

Even still, the mothers I spoke with also employed a multitude of strategies to defend themselves as mothers and maintain a sense of positive identity, a signal of their strength and survival and ultimately as an example of resistance and love for their children.

LOVE MATTERS

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.  

These words have been echoed an unimaginable amount of times all over the world. This verse is one of the most commonly used wedding readings and stands as a symbol of love and commitment throughout most of the Christian, Western, Anglo-American culture. In this culture, love exists as a fundamental component of what it means to be human (Fraser, 2005, 2008; Fromm, 2006; Sternberg, 1998). Love has been conceptualized and theorized from anthropological, psychological, biological, sociological, feminist, men’s, neo-conservative, postmodern, popular culture, gay, lesbian, and queer perspectives (Fraser, 2008; Wilson, 2012). These conceptualizations of love are socially constructed (Fraser, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Lee, 1998), directed and regulated by culture (Fraser, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Sternberg, 1998), gendered (Jackson, 1999; Sternberg, 1998), and take shape through feminized and masculinized expressions (Donovan & Hester, 2011).

35 Verse from 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a, New International Version.
Love and abuse have been dichotomized through popular and academic forums and as a result, the relationship of their coexistence has been under-theorized and little studied (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2008; Power et al., 2006; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wilson, 2012). The intersections of love and abuse in women’s intimate relationships shape the way in which women begin to identify and name their experiences as abusive. How women conceptualize love in the context of the abuse they experience also influences the way they come to view their actions, decisions, options, and ultimately themselves (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wilson, 2012). Researchers who have investigated love and violence in intimate relationships have found that love for an intimate partner and hope for the relationship are amongst the key reasons given by women (and men) for staying in and/or returning to both abusive heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Renzetti, 1992; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 2001; Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Donovan et al., 2006; Donovan & Hester, 2010). To continue to discount the validity of the role of love in these women’s relationships is insensitive and simply irresponsible as it denies any integrity to the relationship itself and any agency a woman has maintained. It is imperative to explore the lived experiences of women negotiating love and abuse in their intimate relationships to attempt to arrive at a better understanding of how their conceptualizations of love play a significant role in their stay-leave decision-making processes.

My Prince Charming, Fairytale Love

In order to begin to make sense of the violence being perpetrated against them in their intimate relationships, many women who discuss their experiences tell stories of romance or fairytale love and these cultural constructions are often what keep women in or returning to their abusive partners (Towns & Adams, 2000; Boonzaier, 2008). Like the Lifetime movie reference discussed in the previous chapter, Wood (2001, 257) found the women she interviewed made meaning of their intimate relationships by appealing to their own accessible selection of cultural resources and these stories “reflect and embody culturally produced, sustained, and approved narratives of gender and romance.” The romantic love narrative is often constructed along gendered lines in which masculine and feminine roles can be scripted. This sets the stage for many women, including many I
interviewed, to tell of the story of their relationships as starting much like a fairytale, one of the beautiful princess who was swept off her feet by the handsome prince (Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001; Boonzaier, 2008). Debbie looks back at when she fell in love with her abusive ex-husband:

I was dumb at age 18. I didn’t know what I was getting into. I was in love! And had that dream of the perfect wedding and the perfect life and the white picket fence and kids. Yeah! The dream that’s not really there.

Angie recalls why she entered into a relationship with her ex-fiancé:

It kind of started in the beginning when I look back and kind of reminisce on everything that had happened. I was just blind-sighted. I thought I was in love, and I didn’t see it, even though I should’ve. If that makes any sense? Like he was my Prince Charming.

Christy also spoke vividly about her fairytale relationship that lasted only a few months:

It seemed perfect. He was like my knight in shining armor. He was going to rescue me and take me outta this hell hole! We talked back then about what we wanted our life to be, you know our dreams together. Then it all changed. I got pregnant and he lost his job. We weren’t going anywhere but here. My fairytale ended real quick after that!

This conceptualization of their stories as a fairytale serves two important functions. First, women can show the rationale and legitimacy of beginning the relationship with their intimate partners. Secondly, and in accordance with the dual nature of the fairytale romance narrative, the prince is constructed to have a type of ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ persona that may quickly morph into the violent beast, who is only tamed through the love of a ‘good’ woman (Jackson, 1999, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000; Boonzaier, 2008; Wilson, 2012).

Loving the Prince, Hating the Beast

The love-abuse duality narrative is apparent in the women’s discussions of their relationships as a continuing ‘cycle of violence.’ Like those interviewed by Boonzaier (2008), many women I spoke with also discussed their relationships as ‘good and bad at times,’ thus also constructing their partners as both good and bad at times, attributing the “out of the norm” violence as the “bad” side of their partners’ personalities. Sophia was quick to put out a warning about the dangers of this cycle:
I wish that I could talk to people before they get into it. There’s a honeymoon phase and don’t go starting to have kids with this person because it’s going to make it worse! It’s not gonna make things better! It’s not gonna make them change! It’s just gonna make it even harder for you to leave!

Lisa describes the exhausting ‘cycle’ of violence in her relationship and what she did for love:

You know, um, so it’s just, it's just a constant battle. It’s exhausting! You know so for a day or two, it would get better and he would say ‘Please stay. Please stay, I'll do whatever’ and then comes the anger and it's just the whole circle, the whole cycle for about a month… but he was calling back and forth, back and forth, um, and then it slowly starts dying off… Um, you know, we are constantly fighting and arguing and becoming more and more physical. Then, my body can't do it. Emotionally I can’t do it. I, I'm slacking at work. You know, it’s just all, it's all coming to a head… and you know, you know it’s hard. I loved him. You know the reason I think that I probably did continue to go back um is because I felt at one point like he was all I had. It’s just that warm body maybe, three times a week, to sleep next to you or that one night of not arguing and sitting down and watching a movie, it makes it worth it. That’s what you’re thinking. Obviously it doesn’t you know, but that is when I loved him.

Many women I spoke with, like Sophia and Lisa, described the curious dynamic of being in a relationship with one man with two totally different personalities. Creating this “personality split/shift” allows women the rationale to overcome the co-existence of love and abuse in their intimate relationships (Yassour, Borochowitz, & Eisikovits, 2002; Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Towns & Adams, 2000). Lisa described the very familiar story of loving the man that loved her back, took care of her, protected her and had fun with her. Like Lisa, Tori describes her ex-boyfriend as “a friend” who spent time with her and laughed a lot, but the cycle was one she became accustomed to:

Again, it stopped [the violence] for a few months and he laid off. I mean he was still drinking but he had cut down on what he had been drinking and he stopped a lot of the drugs. He done a lot of things to make me think that he was turning himself around and then it wasn’t…. And it was the same song and dance with the money always, always, always.

Becky echoed the sentiments above by stating:

I love him cause he’s a good, he can be a good person. Because we did spend a lot of time together just us before the kids, um, and we had a good time and we have a lot of, we have a lot of things in common. You know, we like to vacation and we like to uh, you know, we just did off-the-wall things a couple weeks ago and it was fun.
Becky also added the perceptions of her friends:

[He] was so fun. He was so fun to be around and he was so nice of a guy and it’s just always a great time when he’s around you know and oh, he talks football and he tells jokes and he’s just a happy guy. It’s like no. This is what he does when we go home.

The few times Becky would try to leave during the course of their 10+ year marriage, her husband would try to persuade her not to leave by his professions of love: “You know I love you. You know I love the kids. I don’t want you to leave.” These contradictory messages of love and abuse by the perpetrator, especially at moments of crisis when women threaten to leave, nevertheless result in women’s emotional investment in their relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2009, 2010). It has been argued that “practices of love are another aspect to the emotional violence experienced by victims/survivors, but are difficult to recognize as such because they are not necessarily experienced negatively (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 283). Like some women in Boonzaier’s (2008) and Donovan & Hester’s (2010) studies, many women I spoke with discussed their stay-leave processes as a negotiation of their feelings of loyalty to or sympathy for their partners and responsibility or obligation to their marriages, with most citing a hope for change.

*In Love With Who They Could Be: Hope for Change*

As cited in the preceding chapter, many women interviewed a decade ago, as well as many I spoke with, discussed negotiating their stay-leave decisions with the real hope that their partners would change. Remember Beth who simply wished for her husband to change his abusive ways:

I just wanted it to change…I just wanted us, you know? Like every night I would hold her and I’d have her sleep in bed with me and he’d be out on the couch or whatever and I’d just think, ‘ok, I just want it to be you and me.’ Like I wish he would just not hurt us. Cause he never hurt her but I didn’t know if he ever would. That was my fear. I don’t think he ever would’ve intentionally, but it wouldn’t have shocked me if he would’ve, like taken off with her in the truck while he had been drinking, you know?

Gloria recalls:

I went back to the same situation all the time and I don’t know if it was just like the idea when, ‘when it’s good, it’s good’ and like the idea of ‘I see the potential’ you know? It’s like you fall in love with the idea of who they could be, but not who they really are.
Gloria’s hope for change was a strong contributing factor as to why she, like so many other women, chose to stay and accept their abusive partners back. This hope and longing for what their partners ‘could be’ can be seen as a construction of abuse that is an inconsistent component of the man’s identity existing as a departure from the norm (Boonzaier, 2008). Rhonda, as well as many other women I spoke with, reported feeling stupid for embracing that fundamental quality of humanness: they loved. Many stayed in their abusive relationships for love, even when that ‘honeymoon’ was over because the cycle of violence led them to believe that after the storm, they just may see that Prince Charming they fell in love with in the beginning. As we have seen time and time again, the women in this study did not end up getting their fairytale ending with the men they loved in these particular relationships. For some, there were just too many characters in their stories. These women’s definitions of love also seemed to hinge on their experiences with how sexual jealousy mattered in their relationships.

SEXUAL JEALOUSY MATTERS

*Jealousy is...a kind of fear related to a desire to preserve a possession.*

– Descartes, quoted in Davis (1935)

Since the days of Aristotle, social theorists have been unable to agree on what jealousy “really” is but most can now most likely concur that it comprises two fundamental components: 1) a feeling of bruised pride and 2) a feeling that one’s own property rights have been violated (Hatfield & Walster, 1977). Goetz and colleagues (2008, 482) have described jealousy as “an emotion that is experienced when a valued relationship is threatened by a real or imagined rival, and generates contextually contingent responses aimed at reducing or eliminating the threat.” They assert that jealousy may function to maintain relationships by motivating behaviors that deter others from intrusion into the relationship and that also dissuade partners from committing infidelity or exiting the relationship altogether (Buss et al., 1992; Daly, et al., 1982; Symons, 1979).

Sexual jealousy can be defined as an aversive emotional reaction that occurs as the result of an intimate partner's sexual attraction to a rival that is imagined, real, or even considered likely to occur (Bringle & Buunk, 1985). Committed relationships are largely defined by the expectation of sexual monogamy and can be seriously threatened by
violations of that expectation (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Hill, 2007; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Many researchers have consistently and strongly linked male sexual jealousy or “male sexual proprietariness” (Daly et al., 1982) to both physical and sexual intimate partner violence (Buss, 1994, 2000; Campbell, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1988b; Daly et al., 1982; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Pagelow, 1981; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Russell, 1990; Walker, 1979; Wilson & Daly, 1996). The committed intimate partnership entails feelings of proprietary entitlement and exclusivity and encroachments upon this bond may arouse jealous emotions wherein physical and sexual violence may be used as a tactic by some men to restrict an intimate partner’s behavior, especially her sexual behavior outside the intimate relationship (Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988b; Wilson & Daly, 1996, 1998), and this may be best understood as the behavioral output of male sexual jealousy (Buss, 1996, 2000).

Intimately tied with women’s conceptualizations of love in the context of their abusive relationships was the emergent theme of sexual jealousy. Infidelity, like domestic violence or sexual assault, proves difficult to define in research because “acts clearly defined as infidelity in one relationship may not even be close to infidelity in another relationship” (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, 186). Whether deemed “cheating,” a “betrayal of trust and loyalty,” or “deception,” sexual jealousy was considered not only as a component of the physical and sexual assault experiences of women, but also as a form of abuse in and of itself. There are numerous parallels between certain cases of sexual jealousy and infidelity and well-established and documented stages in the cycle of domestic violence, with women experiencing very real pain, suffering, and consequences. Whether it was sexual or emotional, real or perceived, in the form of accusation or threat, betrayal through sexual jealousy and infidelity was a commonly shared experience in the lives of the women I spoke with. Notions of sexual jealousy were described as a weapon used by men to accomplish a form of successful masculinity, as a trigger for physical and sexual violence, as a coping mechanism employed by women, as well as a turning point in the women’s relationships.

As a Weapon to Assure Successful Masculinity

As previously demonstrated, masculinity and hegemonic gendered ideals play an important role in men’s use of violence against women in intimate relationships. Szasz
(1998) found that sexual prowess is an important aspect of masculinity, especially in locations where economic resources were scarce. For working-class men in particular, notions of successful masculinity have been associated with having multiple sexual partners and rely on the objectification and denigration of women (Szasz, 1998; Wood and Jewkes, 2001). The issue of sexual jealousy seemed to be portrayed by the women I spoke with as a means by which men could assure and maintain this form of successful masculinity.

Carrie’s ex-fiancé constantly accused her of cheating on him and she believes that his lack of trust in her and faith in their relationship led to his controlling behavior. Tracy echoed this sentiment of constant accusation:

Oh he would accuse me, oh yeah, he would call me horrible names…And when I said, when I said um, you know, ‘there’s no way, you know, go ask them.’ I mean prove it, and I mean he, I don’t think he would ever dream of me being with anybody because he still has this idea that he controls me…That I obey, yeah. That he would say, ‘I will kill you if I ever find you with someone else.’ I think that he probably would. Yeah, I think that he probably would… Oh yeah, definitely.

Tracy further discussed her husband’s notions of sexual exclusivity in their marriage, but highly representing men’s sexual double standard:

Because I think that’s about all I think he could probably take because he has had this idea of me not ever being with anyone else or that’s just it. He has this idea that he has been the only one in my life, sexually. I am his wife and he expects me to be with him and only him while he can go cat around with all these other women.

Jackie tells of the jealousy that consumed her husband that would set him off:

I was just leaning over the bar like this talking to a really good friend. He was in the military. I hadn’t seen him in months and he was just, we were just talking, we were laughing and he walked in and it made him mad. And there was nothing between he and I. We had been friends for years, ya know, he just got back from Iraq. The first place he came, ya know, was to see his friends, so that set him off and he drug me into the back room and he was screaming at me and he kicked my knee and he put me to the floor and it hurt so bad.

When I asked Jackie why she thinks his jealousy always resulted in violence, she responded:

I think he felt like he could take things out on me because he felt like I wasn’t going to go anywhere and then he made it so I didn’t want to go anywhere.
An integral component to assuring successful masculinity was men’s ability to ‘keep their women in check’ through these various tactics that eventually left women feeling controlled, isolated, fearful, bruised, and beaten.

As a Trigger for Violence

In Heise and colleagues’ (2002) global overview of gender-based violence, they report that worldwide, there is a plethora of studies that identify a consistent inventory of incidents that are said to trigger male violence against women including: not obeying husband, talking back, questioning him about money or girlfriends, refusing him sex, or expressing suspicions of infidelity. As noted earlier, many researchers have found that much of the violence between intimate male and female partners derives from jealousy and fidelity concerns (Buss et al., 1992; Daly et al., 1982; Vandello & Cohen, 2003).

Nemeth and colleagues (2012) found, in their qualitative study to examine situational factors and chronic stressors that triggered severe intimate partner violence in women in Ohio, that consistently across 17 heterosexual couples, violence was acutely triggered by accusations of infidelity, typically within the context of alcohol or drug use. In a study of men convicted of domestic abuse, Henning and colleagues (2005) discovered that 31.5% of men reported that they were violent because their partners were said to be “unfaithful.” In fact, in the majority of the cases of spousal homicide reviewed by Daly and Wilson (1988a, 1988b), the primary motive reported was the male’s suspicion of infidelity or desertion. When I asked Debbie if there was infidelity in her 14 year relationship, she responded:

Yeah, oh yeah, he would never say that but I know there was. There was a time when, this was all more toward the end because I was so; I was so oblivious as to what was going on, um, but toward the end he was talking on the phone to a “friend.” He said it was his friend Joe and um I’m like ‘why are you on the phone with your friend Joe for three hours at one o’clock in the morning?’ I’m like really? I don’t think so. So I called the cell company and said ‘hey I was on this phone call and lost the number off my phone, can you give it to me?’ and they gave it to me and I called.

Debbie discovered the other woman on the other end of that call and how her husband became violent when she confronted him about it:

Oh yeah, and she was married with six kids. And she was a slob. Like, she was disgusting. Oh yeah she told me all about it and I confronted him and he just...He
hit me. Oh yeah, denied it and said I was nothin but a worthless slob and that I was fat and he degraded me to make me feel like I was beneath him and I believed it. I did. I still have issues with my weight [starting to cry]…14 years of it!

Gina also describes getting a phone call about her husband’s infidelity, which eventually led to violence:

After I had my daughter, there was you know, a phone call that was made, you know, ‘you’re screwing my wife.’ His sister came to my house and said she heard that he was with this other women. He denied it up and down, said he was, said he was covering for his friend who was sleeping with this girl…said he didn’t want to get divorced over this. I called the girl and said like, ‘are you fuckin my husband?’ She denied it, ‘oh we’re just friends.’ So you just become friends with somebody’s husband? I mean, I’m all for havin opposite sex friends but you know the ones that I had, I didn’t even talk to anymore, you know? I was friends with some of his friends, but it’s not like I went out and made new friends while I was married. It doesn’t make any sense to me. I guess it doesn’t matter now.

Both Debbie and Gina previously discussed the years of physical and sexual abuses they had experienced in their relationships, but the toll that the infidelity and emotional abuse took on them both was described as long-lasting and ever-present, even after the ending of their relationships. Not only were these women attempting to deal privately with the hurt and pain caused by the multitude of abuses incurred by their husbands, but they also had to publicly deal with the small town gossip due to his infidelity. Debbie discussed how her husband’s infidelity became the ‘talk of the town’:

I mean I had suspected it but it, it , ya know and then with the phone call that I had made and then the phone call at work and….People still come up to me and say, ‘well did you know he was doin this and he was doin that?’ and I’m like, ‘I don’t even wanna know. Don’t tell me. Please don’t tell me. I don’t even care.’ I mean I care but I don’t care…Yes, it’s like it’s a big gossip.

Heather also discussed her husband’s infidelity as highly place-contingent in that he had to go “out of town” to find work because of the lack of employment opportunities in their small town:

I had my last daughter and all through that time um he was an out-of-town worker so he had girlfriends and I never believed it and I would often say, ‘where did you get this or where did you get that?’ or um see matchbook covers from a place or you know he wasn’t available to talk or I’d call and they didn’t have him registered in a room so then the women started.
Heather described her situation as a familiar one to the women in her town because so many men had to “travel away to work” and she felt this predicament acted as a double-edged sword. She admitted that although he brought home a paycheck, home was a place very infrequently visited so it opened the door to a whole new life outside the confines of his commitment to his family back home. Blow and Hartnett (2005b) have argued that couples living separate lives tend to be more non-monogamous and Utley (2011) found this to be true, noting that the imbalance of power exists because of the perceived entitlement to space. Utley’s (2011) study of black women’s first-person narrative experiences with infidelity uncovered that many husbands begin to create space between themselves and their wives, being away from home more, communicating less, and becoming more abusive. Heather spoke about the separate lives that her and her husband led during the course of their marriage:

I can think back when I was young like that and my kids thinkin ‘oh mom and dad’s just mom and dad, you know?’ Well mom and dad has other lives, you know, and they do have different things they’re goin through…Yeah, he admitted it, um, said he didn’t love her. ‘You know I love you. You know I love the kids. I don’t want you to leave. Um, it was just because I was out of town.’ I said, ‘well this is your life, you know, are you gonna continue to do this?’ ‘No, no, no, I love you. She’s nothing to me’ and um so of course, I was waiting for him to turn the tables on me like he usually did and beat me up for it and he didn’t and that’s when I started thinkin, you know what, I’m gonna start saying and doing things just like him. I’m gonna be confident and say, I don’t want you in anymore. Get out. I don’t need this. And I did and it stopped for a couple of months.

But Heather admits that it only stopped for a couple of months and then his infidelity and violence continued to the point when she realized she did not want him anymore and she decided to turn the tables on him this time.

As a Coping Mechanism: Retaliation and Revenge

The popular press in the late 1990s brought to the fore several reports concluding that women were just as violent as men in intimate relationships (e.g., Young, 1999; Zuger, 1998). Because the studies on which these reports are based typically examined only physical aggression, leaving out other types of abuse, and also fail to consider the broader historical, socio-cultural context in which this violence takes place, the conclusion proves problematic. Renzetti (1999) notes the gendered nature of intimate violence in the context in which the violence takes place and women’s motivations for
violence are qualitatively distinct from men’s. Most research on violence against women in intimate relationships finds that women do use forms of violence as a survival strategy and in retaliation for the abuse perpetrated against them and the humiliation and pain it has caused as a result. Carrie discussed how the discovery of her partner’s infidelity led to her violence, which eventually led to his violence against her:

Well, when I went back to the friends’ house, he was sleeping with somebody else. And I walked in on it…so, me being the red-neck Army girl that I was, I went through him and grabbed a hold of her and I beat the snot out of her, which isn’t good but I beat the snot out of him too. But that was the second physical altercation that we’d been in to. And when all that happened, um, she was lookin to press charges against me but nobody told her who I was so it never happened. But he had grabbed me that night after all that had happened and he had had me pinned against the wall with his arms up on my chest and across and he also had his hand around my throat. And so I had his handprint around my throat for 3 days and I had bruised ribs and he threw me through the door onto the concrete…like, I went through the door and landed on the concrete on my back.

Riley tells a similar story of her discovery of yet another instance of infidelity in her relationship with her boyfriend of over two years:

So I go and knock on the door and the door is locked, which is really odd. I'm like, what the heck? So I go around back and I had a big flower box that stood, I don't know, around 4 feet high. I jump up on that and look into the bedroom window, which is my bed, and there is a girl in there in my bed, sleeping with him. Not having sex, sleeping. Well, needless to say, I just lost it. I couldn't believe it. You know, after everything I've been through, after everything that I've done, and I'm not making excuses because I was ignorant I did stupid things. I go and I'm beating on the door, literally with my fists, not even the side of my fist, crack open the door, his brother ends up letting me in…By this time, my boyfriend is at the bottom of the steps holding me back because he's worried about me getting to this girl, as well he probably should be. Um, so needless to say, a couple beer bottles get thrown by me and finally I just snap out of it. I'm like, ‘what the hell are you doing? What are you doing? This is just stupid it doesn't matter who's there, who was in the bedroom, or what the hell going on, get out of here! Get out! This is stupid!’ So I go to walk out and I'm leaving and his brother comes and is like, ‘Riley please don't go, he loves you, he loves you, he wants to be with you, she just came over to get her stuff.’ Obviously something was going on, you know, and I flipped out again. I was like, ‘what are you talking about he loves me?’ You know the wine key that you open a bottle of wine with? Well I had it in my purse because I worked at Italian restaurant. So I took the key out, keyed his car and then keyed the side of her car.

Riley continued and told me about the devastating consequences she faced:
Well, she called the police while I was ranting and raving downstairs before they even got outside. The police, um, you know, they escort her outside and she tells them that she saw me key the car. Well, um, obviously it was true, you know? I get taken to jail. Um, I did not know this at the time but if its $500 worth of property damage, it's a felony. So, he's the only one I can have contact with because they have my phone, um, and you can't call long distance, so I can't call my mom and I can't call my sister who is, who is the only numbers I know but I know his by heart. So, he is having to call my mom and my sister trying to get bail money to bail me out of jail because he doesn't have any money so he's the only one I have contact with. At this point, my heart is also broken.

After spending the night in jail because of her act of retaliation against his infidelity, Riley faced losing her job at the school where she was working, as well as feeling ‘indebted’ to her boyfriend for bailing her out of jail. Women who fight back against their partner’s abuse violates our agreed upon notions of ‘acceptable’ feminine behavior (Renzetti, 1999; Gilbert, 2002), thus she often blames herself for her own victimization (Ferraro, 2003). Riley stated she felt obligated to apologize to him and stay to make it work, only to face serious physical, sexual, and emotional violence in the weeks to come.

The issue of how women cope in their abusive intimate relationships has received some attention in the domestic violence literature, but there is little discussion on women coping in the context of infidelity and violence. A few other women talked with me about coping with their partner’s infidelity by committing ‘revenge affairs.’ Heather explained:

Um, I’ve found other ways to um satisfy myself. I guess when you’ve been beat up and pushed around and you know you just kind of reach out and I wasn’t getting it from my friends and I know um I went through a bad period of, ‘if you can do it, I can do it.’ Um, for about four or five years and that wasn’t really who I was but that’s what I did. I mean I went out and I got drunk and I fooled around and I had relationships, one night stands, a year affair, things like that, and I thought, ‘he had the best of both worlds, I can too.’ And I think that it just it just goes so fast that and that really didn’t help me feel any better, it really didn’t make me feel like a good person.

Heather continued to discuss the affair she had when her husband was on the road for work:

We just kinda needed each other. Um, and the sad part of it is, the other person’s married and it’s, it’s against all my, used to be, against all my belief as to what a marriage is but I don’t know…But it’s ok because it gets me out of it for awhile, this life, yeah. It takes me away and it takes me somewhere else for awhile and I
feel confident and I feel like if I get a hug, that’ll last me for a month because I
don’t get it…Yeah because you know those scars never heal, I don’t care you
know (long pause) there’s been so many women that, that it doesn’t heal, you
know? It’s like, if I would think about it, it was like it just happened yesterday so
um, I don’t know if you would call it a revenge thing, just to see what it feels like
to be in his shoes, um, could be…Um, and if I have a fling, it’s not hurtin
anybody, it’s just not hurtin anybody. It would if it was known.

When I asked Heather if the affair she had hurt her, she responded: “At times I feel bad
about myself but that’s not, that’s just normal. That’s normal for me. It’s like, I’ve been
used before so…” Heather, like many of the women I spoke with, indicated “feeling
bad” about herself as just a normal part of her everyday life, which was mainly due to the
abuse she suffered through the years of her relationship. ‘What make me think I deserve
better’ was a phrase echoed so many times during the course of these interviews, and in
Heather’s case, like the other women who spoke about retaliation and revenge, their guilt
made them stay in their abusive relationships:

Because of the…probably because of the few times of the ‘if you can do, it I can
do it’ things and that really weighs on me that that was pretty stupid back
then…Yeah, I feel guilty about it! Yeah! Um, to a point, to a point. Because I
think if, if you look at what we had, would you really call this a marriage? So, you
know, during those times when those things happened, I would convince myself
that we’re not married. We’re not really livin the married life so what does it
matter you know? You know, and I mean, I’m not gonna lie, when I was getting
my so-called revenge, I was happy. It was fun. I really felt terrible about myself
when I looked back on it you know and I think ‘oh God, what a whore you were!’
But you know, that was my release. That made me feel good about myself. People
were payin attention to me. We were fun…Wild and crazy girls you know and it
was fun! I looked forward to going out every other night but it didn’t fix anything.

Tia also told me of the revenge affair she committed with one of her husband’s friend and
like Heather, guilt made her stay longer:

Before I got pregnant, I had left a couple times and then it was the “I’m sorry”
and this and that because he cheated on me and I found out and I left. And then I
ended up getting back at him by doing the same thing that he had done to me. [It]
wasn’t the brightest thing but at that time, I’m like ‘you know what, if you can
screw around, so can I’ and I felt so guilty because it was one of his friends that I
felt like I owed it to him when we got back together cause I didn’t tell him cause
his friend’s like ‘he’ll kill both of us, just don’t say anything’ and that was the last
time I left him because I felt so horrible about what I did that I just wanted to
make it up to him.
Committing violence against their partners and the ‘other women’ or enacting revenge through their own affairs was seen as retaliatory strategies used by women to cope with the infidelity and sexual jealousy and the attendant violence of their intimate partners. In the end, however, infidelity served as an eye-opening turning point for some women.

*As a Turning Point*

“When you left your relationship, the one you experienced violence in, when did you decide that you needed to leave, or did you?” As I asked this question to the twelve women I spoke with, many women indicated that their partners’ sexual jealousy and infidelity played a huge role in their decision-making processes about staying and leaving their abusive relationships. Second only to physical abuse, infidelity has been generally identified as a prime contributor to divorce and separation (Molina, 1999; Olsen et al., 2002; Wiederman, 1997). As Anne stated, “Well, he, I did. He was cheatin on me and it [cheating and the violence] just kept getting worse and worse.” Heather tells the story of how she found out about her husband’s “last live-in” which prompted her to leave:

> A couple months before that, I had found out he was living with someone out of town in a different state. And being the detective I was, I called and I got a call from a concerned co-worker’s wife and said, I just wanted to tell you that I would want to know if I were you but your husband’s living with someone down here because I am visiting my husband right now in Kentucky and he’s living with someone under somebody else’s name. and I couldn’t believe it cause I thought she was just tryin to start problems and stuff and uh to make a long story short, I researched and found out where this girl worked and called and said it was a family emergency and I needed to talk to my husband and she put him on the phone. So, he had a long drive back from Kentucky and that’s when I was gonna leave and I did leave for two months. I left for two months. I didn’t have any contact with him whatsoever.

For other women, like Tia, the consequences from her husband’s continued infidelity became too real:

> I just couldn’t take it anymore…the beating, the sex stuff, the other women. It all became too much and I just decided that it has to be now or never. I am going to get beaten to death or die from an STD or something. I can’t live like this anymore. I had to leave.

Sabrina felt these consequences all too well and contracted a sexually transmitted infection from her husband:
Where else would I have gotten that? I felt so gross, so dirty when they told me what was wrong. I was disgusted. I was sick, inside and out! So the next time he wanted sex, I insisted he use a condom. Well, you can imagine that didn’t go over well! ‘What you cheatin on me?’ He was so pissed. I told him I wasn’t about to share and was leaving but he did it anyway, with no condom. Afterwards I told him I couldn’t take it anymore. ‘You gave me an STI, you jerk!’ He hit me in the face and accused me of foolin around on him. Can you believe that?

Sabrina’s story is unfortunately very believable as it has been echoed in research with women across the globe in which negotiating condom use becomes dangerous because condom use is often associated with promiscuity and infidelity (Heise et al., 2002; Utley, 2011). The exposure to STIs in the context of infidelity is another explicit abuse that merits additional consideration.

In a society in which there is a 50% divorce rate and in a small rural community that prides itself on the sanctity of marriage at all costs, the social stigma of divorce weighs heavy in the minds of the women I spoke with. Exiting a relationship enveloped with violence is unimaginably difficult and adding the layer of sexual jealousy and infidelity provides another contextual consideration. Infidelity is a physical, sexual, and emotional betrayal with physical, sexual, and emotional consequences that extend far more than the dissolution of a marriage or termination of a relationship. As bell hooks (2000, 40-41) states:

Even the wealthiest professional woman can be “brought down” by being in a relationship where she longs to be loved and is consistently lied to. To the degree that she trusts her male companion, lying and other forms of betrayal will most likely shatter her self-confidence and self-esteem.

A shattered self-confidence, crushed self-esteem, and battered and bruised body may be the consequences of the multitude of abuses these women have survived, but in the end, they have done just that. They had the strength to survive and being a survivor truly matters in the end.

SUMMARY

This chapter clearly supports the notion that ‘not all women experience violence equally or in the same way’ by highlighting the various intersectionalities that shape women’s individual experiences in the context of their intimate relationships. By viewing women in context, we see that work, age, motherhood, love and sexual jealousy
all matter as they exist as integral components of their individual and social locations that impacted their decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency.

Work mattered for both men and women in rural locations in that it not only existed as a means for economic capabilities but it also acted on a more symbolic level in the construction of rural masculinities. When the work disappeared or changed in these rural areas, it resulted in a re-articulation of the rural gender order characterized by women, especially in the talk-back study, becoming the breadwinners, often challenging their partners’ masculinity and resulting in violence that influenced their stay-leave decision-making processes.

Age mattered for a few women in that they described contextually different stay-leave decision-making processes than their younger counterparts due mainly to the socio-historical period in which they were born, matured, married, and experienced abuse. The general societal non-recognition of abuse, stricter familial gender roles and the perceived lack of socially accepted options for women experiencing abuse compelled many older women to stay in their abusive relationships, as did the number of years invested in their marriages, fewer opportunities to seek out education and job skills, and more pronounced lack of self-esteem, shame, and embarrassment. The fear of “starting over,” often accompanied with loneliness, also differentiated these women from the younger group of women and this context played a huge role in their stay-leave decisions.

The role of the institution of motherhood mattered in that the attendant consequences of conforming to the social expectations of ‘good mother’ often lead to mothering coming under attack, thus resulting in the overwhelming feelings of the loss of control over mothering abilities. Also, mothers in the back-talk study who were raising girls spoke more directly about the impact that their abusive relationship may have on their daughters, which led to more complex stay-leave negotiation processes because setting a good example was often difficult to achieve in their abusive relationships.

Love and how women conceptualized love in the context of the abuse they experience mattered because it influences the way they viewed their actions, decisions, options, and themselves. Love for an intimate partner and hope for the partner to change were key reasons given by most women in the back-talk study for staying in and/or returning to their abusive relationships. Women’s experiences of negotiating love and
abuse in the context of their intimate relationships revealed the rationale and legitimacy of their relationships but also the means to overcome the co-existence of love and abuse. Many of these women discussed their stay-leave processes as a negotiation of their feelings of loyalty to or sympathy for their partners and responsibility or obligation to their marriages, with most citing a hope for change.

Finally, sexual jealousy mattered in the context of women’s abusive relationships, regardless of whether it was sexual or emotional, real or perceived or in the form of accusation or threat. Notions of sexual jealousy were described as a weapon used by men to accomplish a form of successful masculinity, as a trigger for physical and sexual violence, as a coping mechanism employed by women, and as a turning point in the women’s relationships that greatly influenced their stay-leave decision-making processes.
CHAPTER VII
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter begins with a summary and discussion of the research findings and follows with empirical and methodological, theoretical, and policy implications and recommendations. Key findings from the secondary data analysis of the original study and the attendant back-talk study are summarized and discussed in terms of staying as rational in the context of the rural realities of these women’s lives. The limitations of the study are outlined and followed by research implications that specifically address new directions for the sociological study of violence against women, calling for more direct rural research with men, in particular, and with an expanded demographic of women in differing social contexts, utilizing broad definitions of sexual assault and multiple feminist methodologies. Expanding the theoretical arena of violence against women requires an inclusion of place, specifically rurality, attending to the influence of work and masculinities in the rural landscape. The policy implications and recommendations address the importance of education, advocacy, listening and talking and are presented as an extension of the women’s talking back to ways to improve the lives of women and men in their communities. The concluding section serves as a testament to the women’s agency and survival as they discuss the advice they wish to give to other women who are negotiating stay-leave decisions in their abusive intimate relationships, as well as their plans and goals for the future.

SUMMARY & DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Part I of this study was a qualitative secondary data analysis of the original Ohio study which focused on the overall experiences of rural Ohio women who had been sexually assaulted by their male partners during and after separation/divorce. The findings presented in the Ohio study strongly suggested that separation/divorce sexual assault is a major social problem in rural parts of the state. The four main themes highlighted by the secondary data analysis were the failures of the criminal-legal system, failures of social support systems, rural realities of everyday living, and the strategy of staying to ‘keep the peace’ in the home, all while staying strong. Women have to prove that they were worthy of help and assistance (Lempert, 1997) in both the formal and informal arenas of social support and were most often given two options: leave or file
charges, both of which can be extremely dangerous to women experiencing violence in their relationships. Particularly in rural America, there is a tendency to normalize violence against women and many researchers have found that numerous rural legal officials contribute to a form of collective efficacy that protects and/or encourages woman abuse (Goeckermann et al., 1994; Hogg & Carrington, 2006; Logan et al., 2004; Websdale, 1998). Women described that blaming women, not believing their stories, and minimizing their abuse were common practices employed by the formal social support services, similar to Websdale’s (1998) ol boys’ network, that serve to normalize and legitimate violence against women. Most of the women in the original study cited failure of social support systems as a main factor in their decisions to stay in their abusive relationships. Nearly half of the women interviewed did seek out social support services, but found them to be inaccessible or inept at understanding the complexities of their situations that often involved nonintervention from neighbors and friends due to rural social norms and general difficulties with transportation and financial hardships in rural living. For many rural women, the realities of being unemployed or under-employed, facing the rising costs of child-care and the lack of child support and the need for health insurance were issues that became of secondary importance in the midst of protecting their children at all costs. Like Barnett’s (2001) findings, many women in the original study also feared their children would be removed by child protective services if they disclosed their victimization. Therefore, many women’s decisions to stay in their current abusive situation seem more understandable because they are faced with a system that holds mothers accountable for failing to protect their children from abuse by their partner. Similar to what Davis (2002) found in her study, many women with children in the original study stayed in abusive relationships and attempted to keep the peace as leaving posed a greater threat to survival. As Lempert (1997) suggests, women’s survival depends on continued and creative use of whatever personal powers they possess, even if it was only the power to remain in the relationship. In learning to survive within the context of staying (through not reacting to the violence, giving in to unwanted sex, walking on eggshells, learning to read the abuser) these women exhibited great determination and immense will power in making plans to leave abusive relationships. Once the decision-making process becomes contextualized, the demonstrations of
strength and resiliency of these survivors becomes apparent and their decisions to stay make sense. The secondary analysis revealed that the women in this study exercised agency differently than the type of agency that researchers have suggested in the past, within the context of their individual, situational, and historical realities. These women experienced a multitude of internal and external obstacles at the individual and structural levels that shaped their choice and constraint in their rational decisions to stay in abusive relationships.

The secondary data analysis revealed the imperative to focus on women’s contextualized decision-making processes, specifically the decisions to stay, with a consideration of the social, economic, and criminal-legal obstacles they confront in the process. In addition to this analysis, the supplementary data revealed by the back-talk focus group interviews highlighted the importance of talking with women about their experiences with the multiple forms of violence in the context of their own lived realities. Talking with women then and now uncovered their individual, but also shared constructions of the meanings given to the multitude of violence they experienced and their stay-leave negotiations in the course of their abusive relationships. Naming and defining their abusive experiences and talking with someone about them allowed for the construction of themselves and others in the context of their own shared, yet unique social locations. The primary point of differentiation between the two groups of women was in the differing demographic of women and men in terms of employment status in each study. The back-talk study included women who reported having more education and more stable employment with intimate male partners who were under- or unemployed and the original study consisted of the reverse: more women reported being under- or unemployed with less education with male partners who served as sole providers. But regardless of the education or employment status of either the men or women, the ideology of familial and societal patriarchy still proved significant in both groups. This finding points to the idea that employment may not only be a socioeconomic resource, but also a symbolic factor (Connell, 1995; MacMillan and Gartner, 1999; Thoits, 1992), especially in the construction of masculinities in rural areas. Another differentiation between the studies was the fact that not many women in the back-talk study had experiences with formal social support providers when they were
trying to leave their abusive male partners. Many researchers have found that the pervasiveness of these community norms prohibit women from publicly discussing their experiences with abuse and from seeking support (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Krishnan et al., 2001; Lewis, 2003; Navin et al., 1993). The characteristics of abusive male partners and rural community attributes factored immensely into women’s stay-leave negotiations and still remain an important feature of rural life that changed little through place or time. The culture of silence that dictates we ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘mind our own’ when it comes to private matters ‘behind closed doors’ becomes just another part of everyday rural living and many women in both studies suffered in silence in their abusive relationships. Women’s conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization also seemed to play prominently into women’s decisions not to seek out formal avenues of social support.

In talking back to the secondary analysis, it was evident that women made and continue to make meaning of their relationships, actions, and decisions, thereby constructing themselves and others and their conceptualizations and definitions of abuse and victimization factored tremendously into their stay-leave decision-making processes. Both groups of women believed their experiences did not “qualify” as abuse because “it wasn’t the shocking, extreme, Lifetime movie, abuse” (i.e. it wasn’t always overtly physical in nature, it was often emotional and sexual, and it didn’t always result in life-threatening injuries). In sync with research on sexual assault in intimate relationships,36 most women in both studies seemed to identify the physical violence as a legitimate form of violence, while the coerced and forced sex was often downplayed. Even though both groups of women mentioned similar reasons for staying (i.e. the failures of the criminal-legal and social support systems and hardships with children), the back-talk findings provided another important dimension to the process of staying not uncovered by the secondary analysis: it further constrained their ability to be deemed “legitimate” victims. 

Leaving as a process in abusive relationships has been described in numerous studies37 and all women in the back-talk study described a leave-taking process that included going

back, staying, and leaving again in the course of a few months to many years, with one woman who has remained in her abusive relationship for nearly 40 years. Much like Fine and colleagues’ (2005) study of Puerto Rican women’s experience in violent relationships who demonstrated a ‘radical reshaping of resistance’ in which the women insisted on remaining in their homes with their children and in their communities, most women resisted while staying in their abusive relationships. Finally, even though many women discussed their experiences with not measuring up to the notion of a ‘good enough victim,’ as also found in the research of Newman (1993) and Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999), all women demonstrated that even when they stayed, they were actively making decisions and plans and employing a variety of survival strategies that demonstrated resilience and resistance as survivors. Thus, the social, cultural and historical context in which resistance takes place is of vital importance. Abraham’s (2000) study of South Asian battered women’s strategies of resistance serves to challenge the idea that abuse and passivity are synonymous as there are many creative strategies in resisting abuse through marriage. Whether their strength was described as coming from the love and acceptance of family and friends, a higher power, or love for children, it enabled the women in the back-talk study to terminate abusive relationships, while it also enabled them to stay when leaving might have posed a greater threat to their survival and their children’s. The inner resource of strength was highly connected to women’s sense of self and self-worth, which proved an ongoing and persistent process.

By viewing women in context, we see that work, age, motherhood, love and sexual jealousy all mattered as they exist as integral components of their individual and social locations that impacted their decisions as actors to resist domination and achieve a sense of agency. Although many researchers in the field argue that women’s increased education and employment will lessen their dependency on their abusive partners and may propel them into leaving, leaving sooner, and staying gone longer (Kalmuss and Straus, 1982; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Purdon, 2003; Jensen, 2006), some recent work has discovered that employment is important not only in terms of the economic resources, but also as a primary component in the construction of identities in general and also of masculinities in men in particular (MacMillan and Gartner, 1999). This back-talk study speaks to these findings in that work mattered for both men and women in rural
locations in that it not only existed as a means for economic capabilities but it also acted on a more symbolic level in the construction of rural masculinities. In the small rural parts of Ohio where work disappeared or changed, a re-articulation of the rural gender order characterized by women becoming the sole earners often challenged rural masculine identities and ingrained patriarchal ideologies. As a result, many women reported experiencing violence in their intimate relationships, especially when indicating a desire to leave, due to their partners’ resentment and threats to masculine status which influenced their stay-leave decision-making processes. Therefore, contrary to popular notions, a woman’s employment may actually increase, rather than lower, the risk of violence perpetrated against her if her male partner is unemployed as it stands to challenge the cultural standards of male dominance and control over the economically dependent female as he employs violence as a way to repair his damaged masculinity (Bourgois, 1995; MacMillan & Gartner, 1999; Moore, 1994; Simpson, 1992; Weis et al., 2002). Thus, it becomes necessary to continuously view rural women’s individual experiences as a part of a larger set of social and economic structural factors (Donnermeyer et al., 2006) as they negotiate staying and leaving in the context of the violence in their lives.

Viewing women in context revealed that age mattered for a few women as they described contextually different stay-leave decision-making processes and the fundamental point of differentiation between the younger and older group was the socio-historical period in which they were born, matured, married, and experienced abuse. As found in Zink and colleagues’ (2003) qualitative study of older women’s reasons for remaining in abusive relationships, the general societal non-recognition of abuse, the ever-present notion of strict gender roles and the perceived lack of socially accepted options for women experiencing abuse compelled most of the older women in the back-talk study to go back to their husbands and keep the peace in their families. Compared with the younger women, the older women also had more years invested in their marriages and families, fewer opportunities to seek out education and job skills, and more pronounced lack of self-esteem, shame, and embarrassment due to years of abuses from their former partners. The fear of “starting over,” often accompanied with loneliness, was a prominent theme (also addressed in the studies of Buchbinder & Winterstein, 2003;
Mears, 2003; Montminy, 2005; Pritchard, 2000; and Schaffer, 1999) that differentiated these women from the younger group of women and this context played a huge role in their apprehensions of leaving. To add, a number of researchers have highlighted that men’s violence against women also creates a situation that complicates women’s abilities to mother (Stark and Flitcraft, 1988; Kelly, 1994; Hester and Radford, 1996; Radford and Hester, 2001, 2006). In the back-talk study, motherhood mattered in that, although they all desired to protect their children and keep them safe, the role of the institution of motherhood and the attendant consequences of conforming to the social expectations of ‘good mother’ often lead to their mothering coming under attack. ‘Good’ mothers are expected to protect their children from violence at all costs, which often calls for them to end their intimate relationships (Hester and Radford, 1996; Johnson and Sullivan, 2008). However, women who are deemed unwilling or unable to stop the violence or to leave are seen as failing to protect their children and may have their children removed by the State (Humphreys, 1999; Johnson and Sullivan, 2008; Strega et al., 2008). These notions hinge on the problem of male violence as defined in terms of women’s failures as mothers rather than in terms of men’s violence (Strega et al., 2008) and fail to take into account the context of motherhood and the difficulties and threats women face when they attempt to be “good” mothers. Love and how women conceptualize love in the context of the abuse they experience mattered because it influenced the way they come to view their actions, decisions, options, and themselves. Like the findings of many studies38 on the investigation of love and abuse in intimate relationships, love for an intimate partner and hope for the relationship or partner to change and become violence-free were the key reasons given by most women in the back-talk study for staying in and/or returning to their abusive relationships. As found in a few other studies, women’s lived experiences of negotiating love and abuse in the context of their intimate relationships revealed the rationale and legitimacy of their relationships but also the means to overcome the co-existence of love and abuse (Yassour, et al., 2002; Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003 and Towns and Adams, 2000). We live in a society and culture where we are taught that change is inevitable; it is constant; it should be welcomed and embraced and not rejected.

38 Please see Renzetti, 1992; Merril & Wolfe, 2000; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 2001; Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Donovan et al., 2006 and Donovan & Hester, 2010 for an overview.
or feared; it is difficult but essential to our survival. The concepts of hope and change have been paired together in everything from brand mottos to presidential campaign slogans. The belief that people can and do change is a belief sponsored by the multi-million dollar-a-year industries encouraging self-help and psychotherapy. Yet, when women who are experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships site a “hope for change” as a reason to continue to invest, to continue to love, and to continue to try to make it work, they are often ridiculed, belittled, mocked, discredited, and turned away from potential help and services because they are not victim enough. Finally, sexual jealousy mattered in the context of women’s abusive relationships, regardless of whether it was sexual or emotional, real or perceived or in the form of accusation or threat. Confirming research conducted by Szasz (1998) and Wood and Jewkes (2001), notions of sexual jealousy were described as a weapon used by some rural men to accomplish a form of successful masculinity, as well as a trigger for violence. An abundance of research has identified a consistent inventory of incidents that are said to trigger male violence against women including expressing suspicions of infidelity and the primary motive reported in the majority of the cases of spousal homicide reviewed by Daly and Wilson (1988a, 1988b) was the male’s suspicion of infidelity or desertion. Most research on violence against women in intimate relationships finds that women do use forms of violence as a survival strategy and in retaliation for the abuse perpetrated against them and the humiliation and pain it has caused as a result (Renzetti, 1999). The issue of how women cope in their abusive intimate relationships has received some attention in the domestic violence literature, but there is little discussion on women coping in the context of sexual jealousy and violence. A few women in the back-talk study used infidelity as a coping mechanism in the form of revenge affairs and the resultant guilt from these affairs were often referenced as why some women stayed in their abusive relationships. Second only to physical abuse, infidelity has been generally identified as a prime contributor to divorce and separation (Molina, 1999; Olsen et al., 2002; Wiederman, 1997) and many women identified infidelity as a turning point in their relationships that greatly influenced their decisions to leave. Negotiating a violent intimate relationship is

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39 Please see Buss et al., 1992; Daly et al., 1982; Heise et al., 2002; Henning et al., 2005; Nemeth et al., 2012; and Vandello & Cohen, 2003 for similar findings.
extremely difficult but the existence of sexual jealousy provides another contextual component that merits additional consideration in future research.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Regardless of the type of research conducted, studying stay-leave negotiations in violent intimate relationships in rural communities is difficult because these areas are often characterized by social and geographic isolation, limited job opportunities and poverty, the existence of a powerful ol’ boy’s network and a plethora of other factors previously identified throughout this dissertation. Many rural women have abusive current or former partners who ‘feed off of’ women’s isolation and poverty (Websdale, 1998) and many women living in rural Ohio strongly adhere to privacy norms and have little faith in ‘outsiders’ (Lewis, 2003). These factors all act as potential barriers that may prevent women from revealing their abusive experiences to researchers; however, some of these methodological obstacles were minimized using techniques employed in the original Ohio study, as discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Because the epistemological issues of the secondary data analysis were discussed in detail in Chapter Three as well, I will only address the back-talk study limitations in this section.

As dictated by the particular the research focus and rural area where the study took place, the twelve women who comprised the back-talk study represents a small, self-selected convenience sample (with different attributes and demographics when compared to the original Ohio study sample) so their experiences cannot be generalized as a representative group in the broader population. All twelve women self-identified as having been in an abusive relationship and were open to taking part in a study that focused on staying in and leaving abusive intimate relationships. Other groups of women who may not have identified their experiences as abusive or violent or those who were currently in violent intimate relationships may have been unintentionally excluded. Also, the demographic differences may be interpreted as a limitation as far as for comparison purposes, but was utilized in this dissertation as an important finding when comparing the women in the two studies. The validity of findings should refer not to how well the data represent some larger population, including the group of women in the original Ohio study, but rather to how well the data describe the particular instances of larger social processes (Smith, 1987). Further, the inherent nature of back-talk focus groups and
interviews are intended not as a validation process but as an investigation of a “second order,” as a means to “meta-communicate” the research (as cited in Frisina, 2006). The twelve women’s voices were added to my own analyses as a means to open space for multiple interpretations of social phenomena and proved to be an empowering experience for the women as it provided an opportunity for women to exercise a greater role in the research process as they not only talked back to the analysis of findings of a decade ago, but could also tell their own individual stories. This leads to another possible limitation that involves the nature of self-report studies.

Do people tell the truth? This concern with accuracy surrounds narrative or life-telling and a critique of these methods is that memory is faulty and versions of the truth are adjusted, created and mediated through limited language. As I have argued previously, the limitations of language available to accurately describe our lived experiences, coupled with the diverse contexts of women’s lives, creates multiple interpretations of similar concepts. Dichotomous measures of being in or out of abusive relationships (i.e. having left, returned and stayed for any length of time) and commonly available narrow definitions of abuse do not adequately capture complexities of women negotiating stay-leave decisions in rural Ohio. As further evidenced in the back-talk study, abuse was clearly present, but other factors (i.e. women’s conceptualizations of victimization, age, motherhood, love, sexual jealousy, and place) mattered in the context of women’s lived realities in abusive intimate relationships. We tell the truth as we know it although it may not be someone else’s “truth” (Goetting, 1999, 19) and this truth evolves as we interpret the past from our present positions with an eye to the future. When considered in conjunction with other studies, this back-talk study is evidence that women’s responses are never static or one-dimensional and ending a violent intimate relationship does not necessarily end the abuse, especially in some small rural towns.

Lastly, although I have attempted to remain dedicated to reflexive, nonexploitative research, I recognize that my own social location (bias) and research focus may be assumed a limitation. As indicated in my reflexive statement in Chapter One, the development of this project and process came out of my social location and my own lived experience with violence. The development of my particular research questions, methods employed (including how I asked questions and probed for further discussion), analysis
and interpretations all may have impacted the study. My own interest in discovering responses to my research questions may have influenced how I read the transcripts, interpreted women’s responses, and made meaning of them throughout the analysis. Different researchers in a different place and time may have different interpretations or may have identified and pursued additional themes than what was revealed in this study. But in the end, my stance is not neutral and I, like these women, choose to speak. Many have the limitations discussed here may be addressed by future research, method and theory in the study of violence against women.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH, METHOD & THEORY

Where do we go from here? This dissertation has explored prominent themes that suggest new directions in which to continue to study violence against women. We need to focus our attention to researching the rural to continue to not only listen to women’s stories of violence as they are played out in rural areas, but also to begin to understand the construction and production of men’s identities and masculinities as they are negotiated in the face of socially and economically altered rural landscapes. As highlighted in this dissertation, place figured prominently in how women perceived their own safety in their homes and communities, with respect to their formal and informal social support networks. Regardless of time passed, all women constantly negotiated their stay-leave decisions based on their unique understandings of the rural context in which they lived. Many socio-cultural influences of rural areas that may have implications for gendered social relations differentiate rural culture from urban culture such as: greater social and political conservatism; stronger enforcement of traditional familial roles and gender rules; a strong belief in the privacy of family matters; less anonymity and privacy; distrust of “outsiders” and a suspicion of policy solutions “imported” from the city; and greater levels of surveillance, particularly of women and girls (Weisheit et al., 2006). Many of these factors have been associated with reports of male violence against women in this and other studies but little attention has been devoted to research on how these rural social norms and beliefs influence the construction of masculinities in rural communities. Historically, studies on masculinity, much like research on violence against women, have been metro normative or city-centric (Kenway et al., 2006). More recently, an emergent literature has surfaced on the
spatial dimension to the construction of masculinities that allows views of men as situated in relation to the urban-rural continuum in addition to their class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality (Pease, 2010; Stenbacka, 2011). It is imperative to understand the historical, cultural, and spatial production of masculinity and that Connell’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity can be seen as changing over time and space, with the influence of social and economic transformations, as demonstrated in this study.

As this study also highlighted, it is imperative to continuously conduct research that does not take for granted the lived experiences of women in the context of their violent relationships, such as women who have stayed (for any length of time) or who are still currently in their abusive relationships and older women who have experienced violence. As previously demonstrated throughout every chapter of findings, leaving is not always simple and is sometimes dangerous. Many researchers have found that women who try to leave or do exit are also at increased risks of non-lethal violence (Arendell, 1995; DeKeseredy, 1997; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2009; Fleury et al., 2000; Johnson and Sacco, 1995) and many women have described this fact as evidence for why it is safer to stay. Regardless of how long it took them to leave (or even if they are still in their relationships), women are surviving as active negotiators and constant decision-makers representing strength, resistance and survival. It is imperative to continue researching the ways women create agency in their abusive relationships so that we do not discount the rational survival strategies they employ in the context of the many obstacles they face while planning and implementing routes to secure safety for themselves and their children. The complexity and uniqueness of older women’s experiences with violence in the context of their stay-leave decision-making processes emphasizes the need to conduct research with this population of women, especially in rural areas. In the current aging U.S. society where a considerable number of older women have experienced violence in their intimate relationships and many who have lived through an era when society neither recognized nor supported them (Schechter, 1983), research must be sensitive to their unique experiences. Those who do research with older women who have experienced (or are experiencing) violence in their relationships encourage a type of ‘thinking outside the box’ because, for many of the reasons shown in Chapter Six, many older women are
likely to remain in their abusive relationships. Older women in rural areas are at the crossroads of being the product of a socio-historic period when traditional gender roles defined women’s function as mothers and wives and also as existing in an area that oftentimes adheres strongly to patriarchal ideologies and to the strict gender divisions of eras past. Therefore, it is important to not only continue researching in the area of older women’s experiences with intimate violence, but also the intersections of age and place as well.

Finally, determining whose social reality is worthy of description and explanation and who decides what becomes acceptable as knowledge is of prime importance in research that is feminist. We must continue to extrapolate the voices of marginalized women and not selectively hear or document what fits nicely with our own subjective orientation. Failing to actively listen to women describe their diverse lived experiences risks recreating knowledge that suits our own personal, theoretical, or political agendas, without advocating for social structural change for all women. Therefore, we need to continue to focus on the changing demographics of women who have experienced violence in their intimate relationships by including other groups of men and women often left on the margins in research such as communities of color, immigrants, Native women, and LGBTQ communities, as well as women who are members of more than one of these communities simultaneously. The tagline of domestic violence (that all women can be affected equally) created by the battered women’s movement has unintended consequences for many women, especially women on the margins. Everywoman is depicted as a morally deserving victim without agency and is often equivalent to white, middle-class, “good” women, producing a concern only for these legitimate victims while excluding the experiences of other women, namely women of color and poor women (Kanuha, 1996). Kanuha (1994) asserts that this denial of the extent of violence perpetrated against women of color also serves as a rationalization that violence exists as an extension of a society that is dehumanizing to people of color in general. Battered immigrant women’s specific position as immigrants is exacerbated by the socially structured systems of inequality through which they must navigate their lives and their

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40 Please see the studies of Fisher et al., 2004; Vinton, 2000, 2003; Wilke and Vinton, 2005; Zink et al., 2006 for an overview.
experience of qualitatively different hardships must be considered in this context. These women often find themselves caught between two legal systems: one in the U.S. and one in their native homeland, continually navigating the matrix of disadvantage in order to sustain safety in the face of culturally insensitive avenues to support. The violence against women literatures are still mainly characterized by impressionistic and anecdotal assumptions of battered Native Hawaiian and American Indian women. Colonial and racist legacies in some Native communities are bound with cycles of extreme poverty and unemployment, which are in turn, related to the experience of domestic violence and restrictions to much needed services (Hamby, 2005). There is also a common tendency to stereotype domestic violence as inherently part of the cultural repertoire of some marginalized groups (i.e. “Indian love” or “Hawaiian love”). However, it is imperative to remember that cultural experiences of violence are mediated through structural forms of oppression (i.e. racism, colonialism, heterosexism, economic exploitation, etc.) that constantly adapt and respond to life in the U.S. (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Sokoloff, 2008). There is also a dearth of research in the area of battered lesbian women in most social science literatures on violence against women. Kanuha (1994) maintains that even in same sex relationships, one partner’s implicit sanction to dominate or control his or her partner is an objective and logical extension of the patriarchal definitions of relationships, which unfortunately is not limited to heterosexual men and women. Historically legal rights for lesbians (i.e. suing for custody of co-parented children, shared property divisions upon separation, and access to restraining orders) have been curtailed by homophobia in the political-legal systems (Mahoney, 1991). Most of the literature on lesbian battering is anecdotal in nature and the absence of lesbians of color perspectives can be attributed primarily to societal racism and its intersection with other forms of oppression beyond homophobia (i.e. ageism, ableism, classism, and anti-Semitism) (Kanuha, 2005). “The triple jeopardy that lesbians of color face as women living in a sexist society, as lesbians living in a homophobic society, and as people of color living in a racist society forms a complex web of silence and vulnerability with very little protection” (Kanuha, 2005, 76) and battered immigrant lesbians of color also face a xenophobic society that silences their experiences of violence and obstructs their attempts at seeking assistance and protection.
The way we see the world influences the types of questions we ask, how we ask them, and to whom, leading to our choice in research methodologies. Rural research is difficult to conduct due the multitude of methodological obstacles (as discussed in Chapter Three) but continued commitment to feminist research methods is an integral component to doing research on violence against women in rural areas. A large majority of current sociological discussions of methodologies have been limited to deliberations of using multiple methods (triangulation), how to change or adapt interviewing techniques, or rethinking ways to analyze and document findings. What is often absent from these discussions is a consideration of our own research epistemologies and how they construct and influence the types of questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purposes of our work (Kelly 1989). We should challenge social science researchers to learn what other women know and aim to discover how they understand their lives by examining their socially constructed meanings (Bachman & Lanier, 2006). Further, because the way we understand our lives is not static, qualitative methods allows for the articulation or conceptualization of experiences more completely, sometimes in women’s own terms that are not limited to preconceived hypothesis and narrow, context-free definitions or analytic categories.

Social context, the interconnections between women’s experiences of social phenomena and their perceptions of their social world are paramount. Traditional interviewing techniques in qualitative social sciences have the potential to re-create power imbalances that exist between men and women in society (Graham, 1984; Oakley, 1981) but doing research that is feminist adopts new ways of interviewing in which this power hierarchy is not an integral part of the way in which women's experiences are explored and expressed. Therefore, I recommend implementing more back-talk focus groups and interviews in the sociological study of violence against women so that the ways in which women negotiate decisions and make meaning of their relationships may be expressed in “free spaces,” where respect is assumed, social oppression may be critiqued, and a sense of possibility may flourish free from the binaries of rigid objective scientific endeavors (Massey et al., 1998). Again, back-talk interviews with survivors of intimate partner violence would consist of the researcher critically discussing their previous research findings with women, thereby creating new data and potentially
creating new questions and opportunities for further research. Back-talk provides the researcher the opportunity to be both professionally and socially responsible for their research by considering the implications and consequences of their interpretations in regards to the everyday life and social context of the women they talk with. Frisina (2006) declares that back-talk focus groups and interviews are imperative to challenge dominant interpretative frameworks and to open symbolic spaces for social change. This study highlighted that talking was an integral component not only in the sense of providing a safe space for women to discuss their experiences with violence in their intimate relationships, but also in that it allowed this experience of telling to be empowering for the women. As shown previously, many women expressed difficulty in naming their experiences as abusive and for some; it was the first time they had the courage and opportunity to speak out. It is extremely important for researchers studying violence against women, especially in rural areas, to continue to allow women a safe space and to expect to be listened to and believed in the process. Too often, we become hung up on the inclusion criteria used to recruit women for our particular research interests, but if we just let them talk, we may find that they are indeed exactly what we have been looking for and more. Further, it is also necessary to continue to employ broad definitions of violence, especially sexual assault, strength, resistance, and survivors in our research methodologies on violence against women. As this study has shown, these concepts take on a wide variety of different shapes and forms and must factor in the intersectional contexts of women’s lives. How we as researchers, social service and criminal-legal personnel, family, and friends interpret, produce meaning, and label women and their experiences of victimization ultimately determines their survival in both their own lives and in the context of research as well.

There are other ways of knowing because there are other ways of doing so we must appreciate that the very act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change. This idea of knowledge-creation-as-praxis accentuates the power in realizing differential forms of understanding as a type of action that assists in demystifying ideologies that emerge from the lived experiences of women. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the construction of knowledge is an active socio-political process that has consequences for our world and those within it. It remains our responsibility to use it
wisely. In addition to a more expansive research focus, there is a need for theoretical construction that attends to the context of women’s lived experiences with violence in their intimate relationships.

Most theoretical work developed and evaluated in the field of violence against women is primarily urban-centered and a huge gap in the theoretical literature needs to be bridged by focusing on women in the context of their rural realities. Based on the findings of the original Ohio study, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) have offered a rural masculinity crisis/male peer support theory of separation and divorce sexual assault that addresses the rural social and economic transformations that challenge masculine identity and the influence of male peer support on the increased perpetration of violence against women in rural areas. This theory was supported by the experiences of the women in the back-talk study, yet other contexts of the women’s lives need to be considered (i.e. age, education, employment, motherhood, and the intersections of all of these factors) due to the fact that women’s individual experiences with violence in their intimate relationships are a part of “a larger set of economic and social structural factors” (Donnermeyer et al., 2006, 201). It then becomes imperative to continue to theorize place as it exists not only as a geographic entity with apparent obstacles for rural women, but also as it stands as a social and cultural backdrop that houses imbedded ideologies of patriarchal domination and control. We must continue to see place as it intersects within the context of women’s lived realities and serves to structure their stay-leave negotiations and available options for safety. It is also necessary to theorize how rural men “managed to re-make masculinity” in non-controlling and non-violent ways (Sherman, 2005, 31). Sherman’s (2005) rural California study highlighted ways in which unemployed rural men became active fathers while their wives found employment. We need to explore the factors that created this break from violence as a means to repair damaged patriarchal masculinities.

Further, we need to theorize agency and resistance as it exists in the lives of women who not only left abusive relationships, but as well as in those who stayed. As evidenced in this study, women’s constructions of themselves as survivors allowed for resistance of traditional forms of femininity as passive and submissive. We must attend to the forms and processes of this resistance and the many survival strategies employed by women negotiating stay-leave decisions if we are to arrive at a better understanding of how
women negotiate the contours of violence in their lives. As active, resilient social agents, women negotiating in violent relationships may be assertive or passive in weighing alternatives, making plans, trying out strategies, and attempting to protect themselves and their children (Sev’er, 2002) by sometimes calling the police or contacting other formal social agencies and informal social support networks (DeKeseredy et al., 2006, 2007). We must value the finding that many women also utilize forms of passivity as a survival strategy: inaction through keeping the peace or ‘giving in’ to unwanted sex, redefining the situation, and reevaluating their positions (Basile, 1999; Kelly, 1988) and understand that these behaviors are not necessarily irrational or unreasonable but may be what kept them alive (Mahoney, 1991). Finally, we must constantly be aware of the constitutive role of language in creating, maintaining, and changing social relations and constructing social realities. Deconstructing the binaries of victim/survivor and good/bad victim (typically discussed in the context of staying) and the stereotypes associated with these false dichotomies will allow for a better appreciation of the multi-dimensionality and complexity of how women conceptualize, define and understand their own experiences. Doing so allows researchers to inform theory in the context of women’s lived experiences of violence in their intimate relationships. We must stay theoretically and practically committed to strive to understand women’s multiple oppressions and actively seek real social change by upholding the dual responsibility to contribute to both the welfare of women and to knowledge through consciousness-raising or specific policy recommendations.

CREATING REAL SOLUTIONS

Women’s Policy Recommendations: Educating, Training, and Reforming

In an effort to begin constructing real solutions to the problem of violence against women in intimate relationships, especially in rural areas, we need to focus our attention on what the women themselves are saying they want and need to help them achieve and maintain safety in their lives. Based on the interviews in the back-talk study, this section highlights the women’s own recommendations for preventing and confronting violence against women in their own communities. Their suggestions involved themes of education, training and reform.
When women were asked what they believed was the most effective way to prevent violence against women in intimate relationships in their communities, all twelve women first responded with one word: education. Many women believed that education needs to start with young girls (and boys) so that they are better able to begin to define abusive behaviors, with many suggesting we utilize broad definitions, and recognize the warning signs in the beginning of their relationships. Being cognizant of red flags (i.e. jealousy, isolation tactics, verbal/emotional abuse) and not ignoring or downplaying these ‘gut feelings’ is important not only for recognition of abuse but also for setting boundaries in future relationships. Most women believed that educating young girls and boys on healthy communication should also be accompanied by instilling self confidence and self-esteem in young girls so they can better negotiate potential unhealthy relationships. Another component of educating women involved the importance of safety planning. Even though it took weeks, months, years, and even decades to finally leave for good, most women in the back-talk study did leave their abusive partners. Most women suggested having a good safety plan in place leading up to exiting abusive relationships by reaching out and developing a social support system with those they can trust. Some suggested the importance of sticking with the plan to leave and implementing as fast as possible, taking self-defense classes, stashing money, packing a ‘getaway’ suitcase of essentials for quick exits, and documentation of abusive behaviors/events. Overall, however, most women discussed the necessity of being smart about safety-planning and exiting strategies in their small, rural communities, which included screening who they told about the abuse and exit plans as word travels fast in small towns. Part of an effective public education process is creating awareness that a problem exists and providing accurate information to people in the community (Lewis, 2003). Many women in the back-talk study also spoke about the need to spread awareness in the community by providing information to women on local resources and ways to either stay or leave safely. Many women explained that the invisibility of domestic violence and sexual assault awareness, especially with regard to their definitions, and the inaccessible resources in their towns often kept them in their abusive relationships longer.

Next to providing education and increasing awareness on domestic violence and sexual assault, many women called for better training of local social support providers,
which also extended to the need for more understanding and empathetic listening from friends and family in the community. Many women talked about the importance of being met with understanding, having someone believe their stories who didn’t demean, belittle, shame, or force them into a decision they were not ready to make. Women desired that social service providers not only listen and attempt to genuinely understand the context of their lives, but also the importance of confirming broad definitions of domestic violence and sexual assault. Although most women in the back-talk study did not seek out formal means of social support when navigating the violence in their relationships, some did mention reforming the criminal-legal and social service systems is necessary. Some women simply stated that these systems need to start taking violence against women more seriously. Others called for harsher penalties for perpetrators, efforts to break up the ol boys’ networks in their towns by possibly hiring more women in these areas, increasing accessibility of safe women’s shelters and affordability of counseling services and substance abuse programs, and reforming child support/custody policies and procedures. Many women stated that available shelters and programs would help many women take the most difficult first step out of their violent relationships and that more available and affordable counseling is paramount as “talking makes healing better.”

Some women even critically discussed the need to attend to the intersectional reality of women’s experience of violence, especially with children, with regard to important policies such as no-fault divorce, child support enforcement, and welfare reform. In addition to facing their real and perceived fears with an inaccessible, unavailable, and uncaring formal social support systems, many women in this study also stressed the need for continued resources, even after they left their abusive relationships. Research suggests that women leave their abusive intimate partners an average of five times before finally getting out permanently (Okun, 1986) and this uncoupling process may take an average of eight years (Horton & Johnson, 1993). Goetting (1999) asserts that getting out of a battering relationship is a process rather than a single isolated event and the reasons women stay and return during this uncoupling process change over the course of the relationship. We need to continue encouraging women’s safety planning during and after leave-taking, as we must acknowledge that this is an ongoing process and not an isolated
or static event. We must continue to offer creative solutions that recognize the many factors involved in negotiating stay-leave decision making and the many conceptualizations of resistance and agency by identifying their partner’s behavior as abusive and proving that they “qualify” for interventions and support, not as victims per se, but as survivors because, as Maggie explained, even though she is “out,” she feels she will never really be over the abuse:

I think that um, dealing with the aftermath is a big deal. Like this, ya know the emotional… [Beginning to cry] I haven’t cried in so long…I think that the continued um, resources, and the, what to do when you can’t sleep and dealing with those nightmares and the …Yeah, it’s like, we got ya out, now what? Don’t forget about me. Yeah, yeah, that’s what I feel like, I don’t know. I made it but I’m not making it, like I’m out but I’ll never really be out.

*Toward a Broad Vision of Social Change*

Revealing the complexities of women’s experiences and struggles living with and leaving violent relationships reconstitutes violences against women as a public crisis that demands critical attention. The culmination of women’s experiences with violence in their intimate relationships, as evidenced in this study, should be understood in the broader social context in which they are produced. The history of rural society, as characterized by past and current transformations at the political, social, and economic levels, has implications for the ways in which interpersonal relationships are constructed and narrated (Boonzaier, 2008) and also for attempts to construct promising solutions in the area of violence against women. In addition to the practical recommendations provided by the women above, it is imperative that we advocate for what William Julius Wilson’s (1996) denotes as ‘a broader vision.’

In addition to supporting more job training and education for both rural men and women, we need to advocate for policies that ensure that all women get equal pay for equal work and have access to affordable, quality child care. It is imperative that we increase funding for rural social service providers that provide context-specific training that attend to the multidimensionality of women experiencing violence in their relationships so they may hire and train more advocates and continue to conduct community outreach. As evidenced in this dissertation, industrial and agricultural restructuring has resulted in severe job loss in many rural areas and is related to male
violence against women. In an effort to curtail the devastating consequences of job loss and poverty, the private sector must take action to develop and support small businesses in these small rural areas. The creation of more diverse rural economies will help foster economic sustainability through job creation and effective social programs (DeKeseredy et al., 2003; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2009). Overall, we need to take every effort in dismantling the deeply ingrained ideologies of rural patriarchy by giving a public voice to the issue of violence against women. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) call for a shift in community culture that implements “placemaking” in the form of public concerts, plays, and painting (and sometimes graffiti or protest art) that sends powerful messages about violence against women to rural community residents.

The continued practice of victimism through the creation of ‘legitimate’ victims shapes and/or reinforces oversimplified views of women in abusive relationships as helpless, dependent women who lack agency. As outlined throughout this dissertation, the social and criminal-legal implications are immense and are often intensified by women’s particular positions within multiple structured systems of oppression. By directing a gaze solely on some women’s status as victims, women continue to be blamed for any decision they make, without regard to contextual constraints and sometimes find they do not measure up to the societal standards of the ‘good’ victim, deeming themselves not victim enough, worthy enough, or strong enough to qualify for empathetic understanding and support. This personal, social, political and legal gaze is directed away from the perpetrator of violence and even farther away from the social and structural inequalities that further victimize and re-victimize women. We, as a society, must take responsibility for the destructive consequences of the constitutive construction of language through the way it coerces women into a specific perception of reality meant to maintain the status quo. For instance, even though there have been decades-long attempts to educate the public about its use and derogatory history, more recent news (i.e. especially in the cases of celebrity chef and cooking show host Paula Deen and Philadelphia Eagles’ wide receiver Riley Cooper) has highlighted the ever-present battle with language, and in these cases, with the N-word. There are numerous social and political campaigns compelling us to ‘watch our language’ when it comes to certain derogatory words that imply specific meanings. We are told that words do hurt and are
shown evidence in the campaigns against words, such as in the Think before You Speak campaign against using “gay” as synonymous with stupid and the R-Word: Spread the Word to End the Word campaign referring to the fight to end the use of the word “retard(ed)” as “It is exclusive. It’s offensive. It’s derogatory” (rword.org, 2013). Drop the I-Word is another public education campaign that is currently working to eradicate the slur "illegals" from everyday use and public discourse. In this broad vision of social change, we need to continue to support the growing number of campaigns that call attention to language and the personal and social harms resulting from these derogatory words and potential violent behavior that emerges from the ideologies that house this language. I advocate for the creation and support of campaigns that protest derogatory words and slang directed at women that implicitly and explicitly encourage, justify and legitimate multiple violences against women and girls.

Further, we must also support the existing and create more global and local movements that raise public awareness and stand against all forms of violence perpetrated against all women everywhere. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in October of 1975, the first ever documented Take Back the Night event in the United States began the international movement to take a stand against sexual violence in all forms to “create safe communities and respectful relationships through awareness events and initiatives” (Take Back the Night Foundation, 2013). Forming in New York City in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls are a group of anonymous masked female artists and feminists on a mission to ‘reinvent the F-word’ through exposing sexism, racism, and corruption in politics, art, film, and pop culture through live performances, protest art, and feminist publications (Guerrilla Girls, 2011). Founded by feminist activist and writer Eve Ensler on Valentine’s Day 1998, V-Day is a non-profit organization that spans 167 countries around the globe in an effort to end violence against women and girls through education, changing social attitudes, raising awareness and distributing funds to grassroots, national, and international organizations and programs who work end the violence (V-Day, 2013).

Finally, “large-scale transformations in the rural gender order are possible over time that may in turn lead to reductions in gendered violence” (Hogg and Carrington, 2006, 183). Therefore, it is imperative to realize that “violence against women does not just affect women…the same violence that targets women also targets men because rape isn't
about sex, it’s about power, control and violence” (Baird, 2013). We need to encourage a profeminist men’s movement that advocates men taking an active role in eliminating patriarchal control and domination and violence against women everywhere. We need to continue to support men like Jackson Katz, one of America’s leading anti-sexist male activists, and his Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, recognized as “the most widely utilized gender violence prevention program in college and professional athletics” (Katz, 2013). Frank Baird, founder of Walk a Mile in Her Shoes® and Venture Humanity, Incorporated began as a rape crisis advocate at the Valley Trauma Center in California and came to understand that “for every man who could be persuaded to think differently about gender roles, gender relationships and gender violence, many more women would be spared. So, too, would the men in their lives” (Baird, 2013). He continues:

It's sometimes suggested that men need to talk with men about being men, that that's how and where men define themselves. But we don't live in the world alone. And talking just with men limits the possibilities of how we define and experience ourselves. I prefer to broaden the dialogue. Besides, just deciding among ourselves what being a man is doesn't mean it'll be easier to live with the results once we leave a weekend men’s-only retreat and return home to relationships with our mothers, sisters, wives, girlfriends, daughters and other women. We co-create who we are in relationships.

What began in 2001 as a small group of men walking around a park in women’s high heeled shoes as emerged into a world-wide movement with tens of thousands of men raising millions of dollars for local rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters and other sexualized violence education, prevention and remediation programs across the country (Baird, 2013). More recently, Man Up is a global campaign started in September 2009 that challenges youth to “man up” and declare that violence against women and girls must end by providing resources, training, and support to youth informed initiatives through platforms of music, sport, technology and the arts and it is the first initiative of its kind in that it is both youth led and informed (manupcampaign.org, 2013). Social movements like these that aim to end all violence against all women are critical to our survival in this world. In the end, we all must be committed to making the change that Eve Ensler and V-Day (2013) dream of: “a world in which women and girls will be free
to thrive, rather than merely survive. With your help, we can make it happen.” The women in this study are evidence that it is possible to do just that.

In the End, Women Always Matter

You ARE worth it. You are not everything that that person told you you were. That you do matter. And you are here for a reason. That there is somebody out there that will love you the way you deserve to be loved…and if you go to one person, keep going to somebody…if they don’t listen, go to somebody else. - Anna

I found it important to end each one of the twelve interviews with a discussion about the women’s goals and plans for the future and this part of their interviews always seemed to bring a smile to their faces. Each one of these women demonstrated resiliency and strength and their plans for their futures only serve to highlight their status as survivors. Many women planned to begin, continue or further their education and many voiced a desire to be involved in the field of violence against women. Most women I spoke with in the back-talk study eventually left their abusive relationships, divorced, or were widowed at the time of their interviews, but one remained. During her nearly forty-year abusive marriage, Rhonda stated that she left her husband twice but has struggled most of her life with that one big question ‘why do you stay’ and this was evident during the course of the three-hour long interview as she tried to find the words to describe her emotions. Rhonda seemed like one of the toughest, strongest, and most resilient woman I spoke to in this study. When she began to cry toward the end of the interview, I asked her to describe what she was feeling and her words embody the spirit of this dissertation:

I know people think I am crazy for staying and for staying all these years and for not being able to say why. I can’t tell you why, even now. I can say I was young, in love, broke, with kids, in a family that didn’t really believe in divorce, in a town that wouldn’t accept it, depressed and isolated but I don’t know. I have been knocked down, beat up, called names and yet I’m still here. I’ve lived half my life scared. Scared of the beatings, the being broke or homeless, the effect on my kids. I left but always came back. But you know what? I am a survivor. I am. And I am going to get it right. I am going to get that self-confidence back and make it right and if he’s still here, then so be it. But at least I know that I am strong and I did survive.
APPENDIX I: ORIGINAL OHIO STUDY IRB APPROVAL

O H I O  U N I V E R S I T Y

01F042

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for a period of one year.

Project: Sexual Assault During and After Separation/Divorce: An Exploratory Study

Project Director: Walter DeKeseredy
Claire Renzetti
Mary Koss
Karen Bachar

Advisor: (if applicable)

Department: Sociology and Anthropology

[Signature]

Jacqueline Legg, M. B. A., Chair
Institutional Review Board

2/12/02 - 2/10/03
Date
APPENDIX II: ORIGINAL OHIO STUDY CONSENT FORM

Ohio University
Consent Form

Title of Research: Unwanted Sexual Experiences During and After Separation/Divorce: An Exploratory Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Walter S. DeKeseredy

Co-Investigators: None

Department: Sociology & Anthropology

Federal and university regulations require us to obtain signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study

A key objective of this study is to contribute to a deeper social scientific understanding of women’s experiences with unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce. Another one of our major goals is to use the information you kindly provide us to help develop policies and practices that meet the unique needs of women who have or had unwanted sex during and after the process of leaving marital/cohabiting relationships.

We would greatly appreciate you taking time away from your busy schedule to participate in a tape-recorded interview that will take approximately 90 minutes. We fully realize that the questions we will ask you are of a highly sensitive nature and we cannot emphasize enough that any information you provide will be kept completely confidential. Also participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you can terminate the interview at any time. Note, too, that you don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to answer.

We will pay you $25.00 for participating in this study and 31 cents per mile (up to 25 miles) to cover your travel expenses. However, if you do not want to be interviewed, your will only be reimbursed for your travel expenses. Again, we’d like to assure you that everything you tell us will remain strictly confidential.
Risks and Discomforts

Sometimes, participating in a study like this can bring back disturbing memories. If you would like to talk to someone about these memories or anything else related to your experiences with unwanted sex, please refer to the index card we will give you after the interview. It includes a list of local service providers who are highly trained to help you. Also, if you have more questions about the study, please contact Dr. Walter DeKeseredy at (740) 593–1376. Note, too, that if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593–0664. Her name and phone number are also included on the index card.

Benefits

We would like to use the information you provide us to draw more attention to the needs of women who have or had unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce. Guided by your voice, we will also suggest practical ways in which criminal justice personnel and other service providers can better assist other women who have had similar experiences. Hopefully, police officers and other service providers will then be more responsive to the needs of people who have had experiences similar to yours.

Confidentiality and Records

Except for the consent forms, records of the names of the interviewees will not be kept. To further protect your privacy, after all the interviews are transcribed, each tape will be destroyed and written transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet, along with the consent form. And, when we write about your experiences and transcribe the data, we will use a pseudonym and exclude any information that could enable people to identify you.

Compensation

After completing this interview, we will give you $25.00 in cash and pay you $.31 for mileage or for your taxi fare. However, again, if you do not want to be interviewed, we will only pay for your travel expenses.

Contact Person: Dr. Walter S. DeKeseredy, Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Telephone number: (740) 594–8765.
Again, if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593–0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. Please sign below.

Signature________________________________________ Date_____

Printed Name________________________________________
APPENDIX III: ORIGINAL OHIO STUDY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Developed by
Dr. Walter S. DeKeseredy
Carolyn Joseph
McKenzie Rogness
Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701
(740) 593-1376
dekesere@ohiou.edu

GENERAL BACKGROUND QUESTIONS
First, I would like to ask you some general background questions. Again, I can’t emphasize enough that everything you tell me will be kept completely confidential and no one will ever be able to identify you with your answers.

1. I realize that I asked you this before, but I would like to make sure that I have the right information. How did you find out about this study?
2. How old are you?
3. In which county do you live?
4. How long have you lived there?
5. Do you live in or near a city or town, or do you live far away from the nearest town or city?
6. Is transportation a problem for you? In other words, can you get to where you want to go whenever you want or need to?
7. Right now, are you employed full- or part-time? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER WHAT SHE DOES. IF SHE IS NOT WORKING THEN ASK HER HOW SHE TRIES TO MAKE ENDS MEET.)
8. About how much money did you live on in 2002?
9. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
10. Have you ever been married or have you ever lived with a male romantic partner? (IF SHE ANSWERS NO, THANK HER FOR HER TIME AND POLITELY TELL HER THAT SHE IS INELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. PAY HER FOR HER TIME AND REIMBURSE HER FOR HER TRAVEL EXPENSES. THEN ASK HER IF SHE HAS ANY QUESTIONS AND GIVE HER A LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES.)
11. Are you currently married or living with a male romantic partner? (IF SHE SAYS NO, ASK HER IF SHE IS LEGALLY OR UNOFFICIALLY SEPARATED, DIVORCED OR WIDOWED. IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER ABOUT HER PARTNER’S JOB STATUS, YEARLY INCOME AND EDUCATION LEVEL.)
12. Do you have any children?
13. Have you raised or helped raise someone else’s child or children?
14. Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular ethnic or racial group? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER WHICH GROUP SHE BELONGS TO.)
15. What country were you born in? (IF SHE WAS NOT BORN IN THE U.S., ASK HER WHERE SHE WAS BORN AND IF SHE IS AN IMMIGRANT OR A REFUGEE FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY.)
16. Do you have a religious affiliation?

PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY
The next questions are about how safe you generally feel at home and in your community.
17. How much of a problem do you think there is with crime in your community?
18. How safe do you generally feel being alone in public places in your community?
19. How safe do you generally feel when you are at home?
20. Do you feel safer alone at home or when someone else is with you?
21. What about women experiencing unwanted sex… do you think this is a big problem in your community, some problem, or almost no problem? (PROBE: CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?)
22. Do you think rape or sexual assault is a big problem in your community, some problem, or almost no problem? (PROBE: CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?)

SOCIAL NETWORK
The next questions are about your relations with neighbors, friends and other members of your community.
23. How often do you get together with friends in your community in a typical week?
24. How often do you get together with your neighbors in a typical week?
25. Could you count on your neighbors to help you solve your personal problems?
26. Could you count on friends in your community to help you solve your personal problems?
27. Have you personally known any women who’ve been raped or sexually assaulted? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER TO TELL YOU HOW MANY.)

UNWANTED SEXUAL EXPERIENCES
Many women in Ohio and other parts of the U.S. experience a wide range of unwanted sexual experiences when they want to end or have ended a relationship with their husbands or live-in male partners. Their experiences could have occurred anywhere and at anytime and don’t always involve force. Also, unwanted sexual experiences could occur while women are awake, asleep, unconscious, drunk, or otherwise incapacitated.

I realize that it may be difficult to discuss your own unwanted sexual experiences, but if I may, I would like to ask you some sensitive questions. Feel free to stop me at any time, and if you feel uncomfortable with a question, please let me know.

28. At any time in your life, did your husband or live-in male partner ever try to make you have unwanted sex when you wanted to leave him or after you left him? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER WHAT HAPPENED AND ASK HER IF IT HAPPENED OFTEN. ALSO, BE PREPARED FOR RESPONDENTS TO ASK...
YOU TO CLARIFY WHAT YOU MEAN BY UNWANTED SEX AND BY THE TERM “TRY.” IF SHE SAYS NO, SKIP TO QUESTION 32.)

29. When did it happen?
30. Why do you think he (or they) did this?
31. In addition to trying to make you have unwanted sex, did this man (or these men) ever hurt you in other ways? (PROBE: DESTROYING YOUR PRIZED POSSESSIONS, HIT YOU, EMOTIONALLY HURT YOU, OR HURT YOUR PETS OR CHILDREN?)
32. At any time in your life, did your husband or live-in male partner ever make you have unwanted sex when you wanted to leave him or after you left him? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER WHAT HAPPENED AND ASK HER IF IT HAPPENED OFTEN. ALSO, BE PREPARED FOR RESPONDENTS TO ASK YOU TO CLARIFY WHAT YOU MEAN BY THE TERM “MAKE.” IF SHE SAYS NO, SKIP TO QUESTION 36.)
33. When did it happen?
34. Why do you think he (or they) did this?
35. In addition to making you have unwanted sex, did this man (or men) ever hurt you in other ways? (PROBE: DESTROYING YOUR PRIZED POSSESSIONS, HIT YOU, EMOTIONALLY HURT YOU, OR HURT YOUR PETS OR CHILDREN?)
36. Did the man (or men) who tried and/or made you have unwanted sex when you wanted to leave or after you left him ever look at pornography?
37. Did the man (or men) who tried and/or made you have unwanted sex when you wanted to leave or after you left him ever make you look at pornography?
38. Did he (or did they) spend a lot of time with his male friends? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER TO TELL YOU WHAT HE USUALLY DID OR DOES WITH HIS FRIENDS.)
39. Does he (or did they) have friends who hit women or who sexually assault them?
40. Does he (or do they) feel that men should be in charge at home?
41. Did he (or they) use drugs or alcohol before he (or they) tried and/or made you have unwanted sex with him (or them)?
42. Did he (or they) try to or make you use drugs or alcohol before he (or they) tried or made you have unwanted sex with him (or them)?
43. Are there other things you would like to tell me about the man (or men) who tried or made you have unwanted sex that you think are important?

CONSEQUENCES OF UNWANTED SEPARATION/DIVORCE SEXUAL ASSAULT
Now, I would like to ask you a question about the effects of your unwanted sexual experiences.

44. How much effect did your unwanted sexual experiences have on your life?
   (PROBE: EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, ECONOMIC, SEXUAL EFFECTS?)

EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL SUPPORT PROVIDERS
Some people turn to others for help stopping or dealing with unwanted sexual experiences that occurred when they wanted to end or have ended a relationship with
their husbands or live-in male partners. We would like to know about the help you asked for and/or received.

45. Do you feel different from other women who have experienced unwanted sex or other types of abuse?
46. Did you turn to anyone for help? (IF SHE SAYS YES, ASK HER WHO SHE TURNED TO AND ASK HER HOW SATISFIED SHE WAS WITH THE HELP SHE RECEIVED. IF SHE SAYS NO, ASK HER WHY SHE DIDN’T TURN TO ANYONE FOR HELP AND THEN GO TO THE QUESTIONS ABOUT SURVIVORS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE NEXT SECTION.)
47. Who gave you the best help and did their support make you safer?
48. Who gave you the worst help? (ASK HER TO ELABORATE.)

SURVIVORS’ POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
As you know, we want to make women’s lives safer. So, now we would like to know what YOU think are the best ways of preventing women from experiencing unwanted sex when they want to leave or have left their husbands or live-in male partners. We would also like to know what you think could be done to improve the criminal justice system’s response to problems like yours.

49. What do you think is the most effective way of preventing unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce?
50. How can the criminal justice system be more helpful to survivors of unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce?
51. How can other types of social support, such as shelters, counselors, your friends, etc., be more helpful to survivors of unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce?
52. What would you do if you were in charge of developing policies aimed at preventing unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce in your community?
53. What advice would you give to other women who have had unwanted sexual experiences when they wanted to leave or have left their husbands or male live-in partners?

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE
54. What are your plans for the future?
55. What is your biggest concern right now? (PROBE: ARE YOU MOST CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR SAFETY, LEGAL ISSUES, FINDING A PLACE TO LIVE, MONEY, ETC.?)

CONCLUSION
56. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that’s important that I have not asked about?
57. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time and effort. I greatly appreciate your help and I hope that the information you gave me will help make women’s lives safer. Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or have some concerns. Give the respondent the list of social support services and pay her for the interview and reimburse her for her travel expenses.
APPENDIX IV: BACK-TALK STUDY UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII CHS APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII
Committee on Human Studies

July 20, 2010

TO: Amanda K. Hall
Principal Investigator
Department of Sociology

FROM: Nancy R. King
Director

Re: CHS #18336- "Rural Women ‘Doing Resistance’ in Violent Relationships"

This letter is your record of CHS approval of this study as exempt.

On July 19, 2010, the University of Hawai‘i (UH) Committee on Human Studies (CHS) approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the protection of human research participants. The authority for the exemption applicable to your study is documented in the Code of Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46 (4).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at http://www.hawaii.edu/irb/html/manual/appendices/A/belmont.html

Exempt studies do not require regular continuing review by the Committee on Human Studies. However, if you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from CHS prior to implementing any changes. You can submit your proposed changes via email at uhirb@hawaii.edu. (The subject line should read: Exempt Study Modification.) CHS may review the exempt status at that time and request an application for approval as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so. Signed consent forms, as applicable to your study, should be maintained for at least the duration of your project.

This approval does not expire. However, please notify CHS when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact CHS at 956-5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. We wish you success in carrying out your research project.
APPENDIX V: BACK-TALK STUDY MUSKINGUM UNIVERSITY CHS APPROVAL

Zimbra

Protocol 11-94 Hall-Sanchez

From: Hallie Baker <hallieb@muskingum.edu>
Subject: Protocol 11-94 Hall-Sanchez
To: Mrs. Mandy Hall-Sanchez <asanchez@muskingum.edu>

Professor Hall-Sanchez,

I am happy to inform you that the protocol 11-94 Hall-Sanchez has been approved by the committee. We wish you the best of luck with your research and if you have any questions or concerns in the future, please feel free to contact myself or any member of the committee.

Dr. Hallie Baker

Chair, Animal Care and Human Subjects Committee
Psychology Department
Muskingum University
New Concord, OH 43762
(740)826-8350 -Office
hallieb@muskingum.edu
## Would you like your voice to be heard?

Have you ever had unwanted sexual experiences while trying to leave (or after you have left) your husband or male live-in partner?

If the answer is **YES**…

and you are 18 years or older, I invite you to participate in a Muskingum University research project.

The **purpose** of this study is to talk with women to discover how to improve the lives of women experiencing intimate violence in our community.

| • Group Interviews: Secure location in Cambridge in May! |
| • One-on One Interviews: You choose the time & place! |

To learn more about the study, please call Mandy Sanchez at (740) 826-8341 or (520) 904-0940 or email at asanchez@muskingum.edu
You are receiving this email because you were a student in my MAP Sociology of the Family course within the last two years.

I am currently recruiting participants for my project entitled, *Rural Women ‘Doing Resistance’ in Violent Relationships*.

If you have ever had unwanted sexual experiences while trying to leave your husband or male live-in partner or have ever had unwanted sexual experiences after you left your husband or male live-in partner and would you like to your voice to be heard, please consider participating in this project.

I invite you to share your opinion on how to improve the lives of women experiencing intimate violence in our community.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in a confidential focus group interview. Your name will not be given to anyone. Your participation will in no way affect any past/present/future grade and there will not be any academic-related favoritism or bias shown.

Focus group interviews will be held at a secure location in Cambridge. If you would like to speak in a one-on-one setting instead of with a group, we can set up a personal interview at a time and location of your choosing.

**If you (or someone you know) are 18 years or older and would like to participate, please call Mandy at (740) 826-8341 or (520) 904-0940 or email at asanchez@muskingum.edu**
APPENDIX VIII: BACK-TALK STUDY CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent for Research Participation

**Title of Research:** Rural Women ‘Doing Resistance’ in Violent Relationships

**Principal Investigator:** Mandy Hall-Sanchez, Department of Sociology

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please feel free to ask questions and/or voice your concerns. After all concerns have been addressed to your satisfaction, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

**Explanation of Study**

A key objective of this project is to contribute to a deeper social scientific understanding of women’s experiences with unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce. Another major goal is to provide a comfortable, open space for the free discussion of your experiences with violence in your relationship(s). The information you share will be used to help develop policies and practices that meet the unique needs of women who have or had unwanted sex during and after the process of leaving marital/cohabiting relationships.

I would greatly appreciate you taking time away from your busy schedule to participate in a tape-recorded group interview that will take approximately 90 minutes. I fully realize that the questions I will ask you are of a sensitive nature and I cannot emphasize enough that any information you provide will be kept completely confidential.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, you can terminate the interview at any time and you don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to answer.

Again, I assure you that everything you say during the interview process will remain strictly confidential. All individuals who volunteer to participate will not be referred to by their real names, no identifying information will be linked to you, and all records of your participation in the study (including consent forms with your signature, audio recordings, researcher’s notes and transcriptions) will be kept in a secure place in which only I will have access to. These records will be destroyed permanently on or before December 15, 2015.

**Risks and Discomforts**

Sometimes, participating in a project like this can bring back disturbing memories. If you would like to talk to someone about these memories or anything else related to your experiences with unwanted sex and/or partner violence, please contact the Haven of Hope toll free at 1-800-304-4673 or the Muskingum University Counseling Services at (740) 826-8142. Also, if you have more questions about the study, please contact Mandy Hall-Sanchez at (740) 826-8341. **Note, too, that if you have any questions regarding your**
rights as a research participant, please contact Animal Care and Human Subjects, Muskingum University, (740) 826-8311. Contact names and phone number are also included on the index card.

Benefits

I would like to use the information you provide to draw more attention to the needs of women who have or had unwanted sex during and after separation/divorce. Guided by your voice, I will also suggest practical ways in which social service providers and criminal-legal personnel can better assist other women who have had similar experiences. Hopefully, police officers, other service providers, and future researchers who study violences against women will then be more responsive to the needs of people who have had experiences similar to yours.

Confidentiality and Records

Except for the consent forms, records of the names of the interviewees will not be kept. To further protect your privacy, after all the interviews are transcribed, each recording will be deleted and written transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet, along with the consent form. And, when I write about your experiences and transcribe the data, I will use a pseudonym and exclude any information that could enable people to identify you.

Contact Person: Mandy Hall-Sanchez, Department of Sociology, Muskingum University, New Concord, Ohio. Telephone number: (740) 826-8351/(520) 904-0940. Email: asanchez@muskinum.edu

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and freely and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Muskingum University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. Please sign below.

*Special Note for MU students: Participation in this project is completely voluntary and will in no way affect past, present, or future grades or academic considerations. Further, there will be no amendments to any grade, nor will there be academic-related favoritism or bias shown based on your participation in this project.

________________________, grant my permission for Mandy Hall-Sanchez to record the interview in its entirety to be transcribed at a later date.

Signature________________________________________ Date________
Printed Name________________________________________
APPENDIX IX: BACK-TALK STUDY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

As you know, I am conducting a study of women’s response back to results from a research project conducted 10 years ago on women’s unwanted sexual experiences when they wanted to end or have ended relationships with their husbands or partners. These results will help researchers determine if we are on the right track in asking the right questions to make women’s lives safer. In addition, the data obtained from these conversations will be used to complete my doctoral dissertation from the University of Hawaii at Manoa (to be presented to the UH academic and public communities in December 2013).

Any information you give me will be carefully protected and held as confidential. No one will ever be able to identify you because of your responses. Also, you do not have to answer or respond to any question you do not want to.

Before we get started, do you have any questions you would like to ask me? Is it safe for you to talk now? Do you feel safe talking here?

[Read and confirm Informed Consent. Obtain signed copy and consent to audio record.]

GENERAL BACKGROUND
1. How old are you?
2. How did you find out about the study?
3. In which county do you live? How long have you lived there?
4. Is transportation a problem for you? Has it ever been?
5. Right now, are you employed? FT/PT?
   a. Yes: what do you do?
   b. No: how do you make ends meet?
6. Highest level of education completed?
7. Have you ever been married or lived with a male partner?
8. Are you currently married or living with a romantic partner?
   a. NO: status (legal separation, divorced, widowed)?
9. Do you have any children?
10. Consider yourself belonging to ethnic or racial group?
11. Religious affiliation?

PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY
We asked women about how safe they generally feel at home and in their communities.
1. A large majority stated that unwanted sex and rape/SA in their community is a major problem. Do you agree/disagree? Why?
2. Do you believe there is an acceptance of abuse of women in your community? Why?
3. Many women said that their partners had guns in the home (usually for hunting). How important is hunting to men in this community? Why?

SOCIAL NETWORK
We then asked women about relations with neighbors, friends and other community members.
1. Most women stated they could not count on their neighbors to help solve their personal problems. Do you agree? Why do you think this is?
2. Most of the women we interviewed stated they personally knew other women who have been sexually assaulted. Do you?
3. A majority stated that it was difficult to tell others about the abuse because “everyone knows everyone” in their community. Do you agree?
4. Most also said that their partners isolated them from friends and family. Did your partner ever keep you from others? How?

MPS
Women were asked to speak about the behaviors of the partners who were abusive towards them.
1. A large majority of the women said that these partners spent a lot of time either drinking or doing drugs with male friends. Did your partner do this?
2. Many women also stated that their partners had male friends who physically and/or sexually assaulted the women they were romantically involved with. Do you know if any of your partner’s friends also assaulted women?
3. Almost 80% of women interviewed said that they believe their partners should be in charge at home? Does this surprise you? Why/why not? How do you feel?

UNWANTED SEXUAL EXPERIENCES
Many women experience a wide range of unwanted sexual experiences when they want to end or have ended a relationship with their husbands or male partners. Their experiences could have occurred anywhere at any time and don’t always involve physical force. Also, unwanted sexual experiences could occur while women are awake, asleep, unconscious, drunk or otherwise incapacitated.

I realize that it may be difficult to discuss your own unwanted sexual experiences, but if I may, I would like to ask you a few sensitive questions. Again, you can simply answer yes or no or if you feel comfortable, you may talk as much as you want but please remember that all of your responses will be completely confidential.
1. At any time in your life, did your partner ever try to make/make you have sex when you wanted to leave or after you have left him?
   a. What happened? When (expressed desire, trying to leave, after left)?
   b. Why do you think he did this?
   c. How did this make you feel?
2. Did he hurt you in other ways? (Physical, emotional, financial, destroy possessions, hurt children/pets)
CONSEQUENCES
We asked women about the effects of the violence they experienced both during and after their relationships. Most women discussed many emotional effects (fear, nightmares, depression, low self-esteem, mistrust of men); physical (scars, bruises, broken bones, UTI); sexual (aversion/no desire, pain, no orgasm); economic (trouble with housing, clothes, food, jobs).
1. Have you experienced any of these effects as a result of the violence in your relationship?
2. Are you still experiencing any of these effects?

EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL SUPPORT PROVIDERS
We asked women to talk about the help they may have sought and/or received when they wanted to end or were trying to end their relationships.
1. More than half considered friends the best source of support (with family members and the shelter coming in 2nd). Is this true for you as well?
2. Many women ranked criminal justice system agencies as the worst form of social support. Do you have any experiences with the CJS?
3. Many women spoke of a good ol’ boys network in their community. Do you have any experience with this?
4. Was there anyone else you turned to for support?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
The goal of the study 10 years ago and the goal now is to make women’s lives safer so I would like to know what you think can be done to accomplish this.
1. What do you think is the most effective way of preventing violence during and after separation/divorce?
2. If you were in charge of developing policies aimed at preventing violence against women in your community, what would you do?
3. What advice would you give women who were wanting/trying to end their partners?

NEW DISS QUESTIONS
1. Do you think rural women who experience violence in intimate relationships are different than urban women?
2. Do you think rural men who abuse are different than urban men?
3. What does the word “survivor” mean to you?
4. Many women indicated that they had to find enough “strength” to leave. What does this strength look like for you?
   a. What ultimately gave you the strength to leave?
   b. What makes you strong now?
5. What did we leave out of our research?
   a. What questions were not asked?
   b. What should we focus on next?
6. What else should I know about you?
   a. What are your goals/plans for the future?

WRAP-UP
Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I greatly appreciate your help and please know that the information you shared with me will help to make women’s lives safer. Please feel free to contact anyone at the Haven of Hope or myself if you have any questions or concerns. [Hand out contact cards]
REFERENCES


Annan, S. L. (2011). “It’s not just a job. This is where we live. This is our backyard”: The experiences of expert legal and advocate providers with sexually assaulted women in rural areas. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 17(2), 139-147.


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