

**STRENGTH IN ADVERSITY: MOTHERHOOD FOR WOMEN WHO HAVE
BEEN BATTERED**

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ABSTRACT

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Violence against women in intimate relationships in Canada occurs in astonishing proportions. One in four Canadian women have experienced battering by a partner. This battering coexists with parenting children who witness or experience the abuse. Although researchers have described women's experiences of abuse, factors influencing their decision-making, and the experiences of children in abusive contexts, there is a paucity of literature that addresses how women mother and parent their children within this adversity. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experience of motherhood from the perspective of women who have been battered. In this research, the way in which women come to understand their experiences as mothers was of central concern.

The method used in this study was interpretive description, a qualitative research approach that allowed women's accounts of their experiences to be conceptualized as constructed narratives that reflect their attempt to make sense of their lives as mothers. Five women who have been battered who are mothers were interviewed twice for this study. The open-ended interviews were transcribed verbatim and their accounts were analyzed for emerging patterns and themes.

The findings of this study showed that the women experienced many complex challenges while mothering in an abusive relationship and that many of these extended beyond the relationship once women left. The way the women fulfilled their roles as mothers was influenced by the abuse in their lives, by their perceived social ideals of motherhood, and by their concerns for both their children and themselves. Within the context of an abusive relationship, women used various strategies to care for and protect their children including minimizing the intensity and frequency of abuse. Controlling behaviors of partners influenced parenting options for mothers and altered their ability to parent according to their values. After leaving their abusive relationships, women found a sense of meaning in being a mother that helped them to build self-esteem, support their children, and experience personal growth.

The experiences of motherhood revealed in this study extend our understanding of the complexities of being a mother in the context of abuse, point to the need to revise existing theories to reflect broader conceptualizations of motherhood, and provide direction for supporting women and their children in health care encounters.

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PREFACE
INITIATION OF DELICIOUS
Gail Alexander

He was your father, and in this stone house we sat for three long years daring only to look out the little window at the garden denied to us. There was poverty of kindness in your father's house. Caught in his awful game, I shrank to a faded almost-unable-to-trace-the-outline-way. Every so often during these troubled years a chill would brush by us and bring an expression to my eyes that you did not understand, as if at such times I would say to myself, "Poor child, I have made a dangerous bargain without knowing."...My child, I recognized that I must wake and think of you before we both slept The Eternal Sleep. There was already enough history and I could not tolerate you perishing, your sparkle gone away....I was to take you to a place of fulfillment on this kindly earth. I flung shrewdness on like a velvet cloak leaving with you in my arms, stone and curse upon my back. Even at that I felt a stillness, like a lingering dewdrop, that filled me with the most amazing sense of peace. Yes, destiny waits for one lone soul to shield the blow from a father's fist.

The above is an excerpt from a short story written by Gail Alexander. The full story can be found in Appendix E. I am moved by her words and touched by her generosity.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

...I have waited like this many times. The news of a child being transported to the intensive care unit hangs in the air. Child abuse is suspected and the family has a known history of domestic violence that has previously put the mother in the hospital. It is not reality for me yet but regardless, I already know I will have to care for a child within the context of a family that I may feel is responsible for the child's injuries. I think...What kind of a mother stays? Doesn't she care about her children?...Some people should not be allowed to have children...If it was me I would leave...How could she do this to her children, she must have known? Clearly, this mother has made some bad decisions in her life! I know...I do not know the whole story.

This thinking reveals some of the preconceptions about mothers who have been battered by their partners that I held before I had the opportunity to work more closely with these mothers. I no longer see that 'the family' has a 'history of domestic violence'; instead, I see a batterer. I no longer blame mothers for not protecting their children from violent partners; I see a safety net that does not allow women many choices. I now recognize that women do protect their children in meaningful ways. In understanding the insights I have gained through my exposure, I recognize that many nurses have not yet confronted their own similar assumptions.

Background to the Problem

Women who experience battering are stigmatized within our society. When we stigmatize a phenomenon, we inhibit our exploration of it. Because of this, nurses and other health care professionals have little opportunity for critical reflection on their practice with women who have been battered. However, nurses in all settings may care for families with

such experiences (Johnson, 1996; Rodgers, 1994), and therefore stigmatizing attitudes must be challenged. Unexamined assumptions may result in practice guided by prevalent notions of 'family violence,' either rendering the societal problem invisible or making it visible only as an individual woman's problem.

Too many of the children that nurses care for have lived with a violent parent. If these children have not experienced battering directly, they may have been exposed to the battering of their mothers. Statistical evidence supports that nurses care for numerous children who have witnessed violence (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Henderson, 1990, 1993; Hilton, 1992; Hughes, 1988; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Suh & Abel, 1990). However, unlike the visible wounds that may result from direct violence, children's wounds caused by witnessing their mother's battering may not be visible to nurses. Whether violence is visible or not, nurses must care for children and their families in accordance with standards of nursing practice, legislative directives, agency policies, and their own professional accountability to society.

One of the most prominent and accepted standards within the field of pediatrics is family-centred care (Ahmann, 1994). A family-centred care approach to nursing is based on the belief that the family is the expert on their child. Families are viewed by the health care team as full partners in the care of the child in the hospital (Ahmann). This philosophy of care may be problematic when nurses care for children who have been abused or who have witnessed battering. When nurses have an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the

dynamics of battering, conflict between the various standards of practice may arise for nurses caring for children who have had such experiences. For example, when advocating for the rights of the child, nurses are often brought into direct conflict with parents' preferences and with institutional policies around parents' rights. This occurs when nurses take a child-centred approach to their care in order to advocate for the child. This child-centred approach to care may result from nurse's unexamined assumptions about who is responsible for the abuse. This study's exploration of battering may better illuminate the struggles of mothers to protect their children. When nurses better understand the social context, such as lack of support for mothers, nurses may be better prepared to work with mothers who experience battering.

The motivation for this research project arose from my connection with a group of women who had been battered by their partners, all of whom have become dedicated to ending violence for women and children in our society. The women's strength and unwavering commitment to this ideal in the face of poverty, racism, sexism, and other marginalizations they have experienced is reflected in their pledge to work toward the protection of other women and children. Their own children have been a focal part of their personal struggles to live violence-free. As I reviewed the literature in this field, I became aware of how inadequately the experience of motherhood in the context of violence is documented and therefore how poorly health care professionals understand their experiences. I believe it is important to hear the stories of motherhood that women who have experienced

violence have to tell so that nurses can better understand the struggles women have as parents.

The theoretical foundation for nursing practice in the area of motherhood is problematic, both in terms of the theories themselves and in terms of how they have been interpreted and applied. Theoretical perspectives of motherhood have been developed within several disciplines including family studies, sociology, women's studies and developmental psychology (Burman et al., 1996; Freidman, 1992; Gordon, 1990; Ribbens, 1998; Rubin, 1984; Swift, 1995). In particular, family systems theories have been predominant in shaping health care policy, practice, and research (Freidman, 1992; Johnson, Jeppson, & Redburn, 1992). These theories direct nurses to approach mothers as part of a family system. For women in Western society, the motherhood role as nurturer and caregiver with primary responsibility for children is naturalized. This naturalization of motherhood shapes the interpretation of theories such as family systems theory, thereby influencing nursing practice (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993). For example, as nurses, we tend to believe that we should support the presence of mothers when children are hospitalized (Gonzalez, Routh & Armstrong, 1993; Tomlinson, Kirschbaum, Tomczyk & Peterson, 1993). Administrators support family-centred care philosophies in our hospitals (eg. BCCH, 1995) and therefore, nurses expect families (read mothers) to be responsible for children's health (Mayall, 1996). In the case of battering, mothers are pathologized because of the perception that they have failed to fulfill their roles as nurturers and caregivers by not protecting their children from the

direct or indirect violence. Violence can become the lens through which nurses view motherhood for women. Thus, when a stigmatizing phenomenon such as battering is involved, reliance on family systems theories may limit a nurse's capacity to provide care that attends to the complexity of women's lives.

Similarly, the developmental psychological theories of maternal role attainment that are also used by nurses become problematic within the context of battering (Bergum, 1989; Lederman, 1984; Rubin, 1984). These particular theories help nurses to understand some of the transitions and challenges women experience as they become mothers and take on the tasks associated with motherhood. Although these theories contribute to our understanding of women's experiences, just as with family systems theory, they can also reduce our capacity to appreciate the larger context in which women's lives are lived. When the label of battered stigmatizes a woman, it is assumed that her experience of motherhood differs from a 'normal' experience of being a mother. Although it may be undeniable that violence contributes to the complexity of motherhood, there may be a tendency to pathologize all of a woman's day to day challenges as a mother as being a product of that violence (Fay, 1999; Nicholson, Sweeney, & Geller, 1998; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Swift, 1995). Thus, challenges that maternal role attainment theorists consider normal may be reframed as abnormal because of the context in which they occur (Rubin, 1984).

In as much as nurses' practice with women may be shaped by these theories, it may equally be shaped by society's prevailing notions about women who have been battered.

Without a clear understanding of motherhood for women who have been battered, nurses are left to fall back on many embedded assumptions, myths, and ideologies about motherhood and the complexities of women's choices and their relationships with their children (Fay, 1999). Since these prevailing notions of motherhood have not been widely problematized, women who are in this situation will continue to be marginalized by the impact of unexamined assumptions embedded in nursing practice, research and policy.

We know very little about women's experiences of mothering in a context of battering. A primarily child-centred approach has led researchers to focus on one particular aspect of this issue—women's thoughts about their children witnessing domestic violence (Henderson, 1990, 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a, 1995b). This approach has helped nurses begin to understand how the context of battering shapes women's lives with regards to their roles as mothers. However, it falls short of creating a mechanism by which the motherhood experience of these women can be more fully appreciated and their voices heard.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this proposed research study was to explore the experience of motherhood from the perspective of women who have been battered. In particular, through interviews with women this study explored women's perceptions of their personal parenting realities, their understanding of the context in which they live, and their understanding of how this context shapes the decisions they made about their children. In this research, the

way in which women come to understand their experiences as mothers within the current social context was of concern. Therefore, some attention to personal and sociopolitical context was warranted.

Research Questions

The questions explored in this research study were:

1. What is the meaning of motherhood for women who have been battered as revealed in their life stories?
2. How does the personal context in which these women live influence the decisions they make in relation to their children?
3. How does the sociocultural and interpersonal context shape the ways that women construct narratives of their experience? Do these contexts shape their personal identities as mothers?

Definition of Terms

This study focused on the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered by their partners.

1. Women who have been battered refers to women who experience physical and emotional abuse.
2. Battering is defined as the physical and psychosocial sequelae of abuse (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988).
3. Children who witness battering are those children who are made aware of the battering against their mothers by directly viewing, hearing or subsequently viewing the effects of battering on their mothers.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, I made the following assumptions:

1. Women who have been battered were the appropriate source of knowledge about their experience of motherhood.
2. Motherhood is an important aspect of the complex life of any woman.
3. While no two women have the same experience, there may be commonalities within the experiences of women that provide useful understanding for nursing practice.
4. Nurses may experience conflicts within their practice when caring for women who have been battered or for their children. More explicit knowledge about the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered may help nurses deal more effectively with women they encounter in their practice.

Summary

This investigation began with a personal story of change. Many nurses may hold biases about the topic of battering that may cloud their understanding and create tension for them in their practice. Effective communication with women—built on a foundation of understanding of the issues of violence—may best contribute toward an optimum of care and support for women who have been battered. I outlined my particular interest in this study, and I clarified some of the dominant thinking surrounding women's experiences of motherhood in the context of being battered. Evolving out of my own practice as a pediatric intensive care nurse as well as my involvement with women who have been battered by their partners, this research will hopefully assist nurses to better support women and children.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To describe the current understanding of the experience of motherhood for women who experience battering, in this chapter I examined the evidence from the relevant literature. Extensive research in the area of battering reveals that women face private injustices that do not end by making their lives public (Fineman & Mykitiuk, 1994). Battering, for mothers, coexists with parenting children who witness or experience battering. These children, in turn, are at risk for many problems associated with growing up amid violence. Mothers are often held responsible by people with whom they are in contact with for their children's experiences. The assumption that they are responsible forces mothers to feel guilt and to actually live the repercussions of the failure to protect their children—"a double victimization"—even when someone else is responsible for the violence in their lives (Peled, 1993, p. 46). Children are often used as pawns in a challenge of wills within the context of frequent custody and access hearings and/or the context of forced visitation with the batterer when the mother must bring the children to the batterer herself. For many women, limited choices force a woman and her children out of her home and into shelters and/or into poverty. These same choices are also limited by the social stigmatization of battering. Despite this bleak picture, many women are able to parent their children in meaningful ways and develop strong relationships with their children.

To capture the current understanding of motherhood for women who have been battered, the available literature is organized here into five sections: 1) theoretical perspectives of motherhood, 2) battering and motherhood, 3) social responses: children in the middle, 4) social myth-understandings and, 5) a current understanding: motherhood for women who have been battered. For the purposes of this review the threads that create the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered must be separated. Because the components of mother's lives are interwoven, delineating threads toward separate analyses obscures the picture of the whole fabric. Yet, by understanding each component of the lives of mothers who are battered, we can glimpse what is not yet being done for women that could perhaps support their lives and their children's lives.

Theoretical Perspectives of Motherhood

In this study, the experience of motherhood amid battering is presumed to influence women's experiences of their roles as mothers. To evaluate this idea, knowledge must be gained about how women who have not lived in violence understand and experience motherhood; this knowledge can act as a foundation for an understanding of how the mothering experience is possibly altered by the battering.

Motherhood has been idealized as a time of nurturing and self-sacrifice. Consistent with this image, women are expected to protect their children at all costs (Ingram & Hutchinson, 1999). Popular culture reinforces these ideas from the magazine aisles to the playground culture; mothers are inundated with messages regarding how to be the perfect

parent. Mother's lives operate within increasing trends toward notions of a child-centred universe. Motherhood is a valued role for women in Western society and traditionally women are seen as primary caregivers for their children (Ingram & Hutchinson). Pregnancy can even elevate a woman's status within society and increase a woman's self-esteem. Many women regard having children as essential for their view of themselves as women (Leifer, 1980).

Dominant theoretical perspectives of motherhood reflect these ideals; indeed, the normative character of motherhood is presented as a transitional role from woman to parent (Lederman, 1984; Rubin, 1984). Maternal role attainment has been described by theorists as a process where women assume the role of mother and adapt to changes that are inherent in the process. Embedded in the role attainment theory is the socialization of the woman into the role of mother. Lederman (1984) identifies this attainment of motherhood role as a developmental step between being a childless woman to being a woman-with-child.

Motherhood is constructed as a normal and natural, if not essential, role for women. This social construction of what is appropriate motherhood and what is normative mothering has various effects on the lives and identities of women (Standing, 1998). This naturalization of motherhood may offer some explanation as to why mothers are held solely responsible for the well being of their children.

Vangie Bergum's (1989) book, entitled *Woman to mother: A transformation*, has become a pivotal book for feminist mothers (Gordon, 1990). Bergum studied women as they

make the transition into this mothering experience. She offers an alternative view of the context of motherhood that captures more of the complexity of forces that shape women's experiences. She uses a metaphor of weaving the threads of motherhood into a fabric. Each moment and experience in the profound transformation of a woman is a thread that creates the fabric in a complex pattern. She also describes story moments that are woven into the fabric to describe the reality of a woman's experience. The pattern is individual, but the whole that is created brings the woman a clearer picture of the meaning of being a mother. Bergum aptly speaks of how the responsibility of having a child blurs the experience of the self for the mother.

Bergum (1989) considers the complexities of the social context in which the transformation from woman to mother occurs.

For many women facing the responsibility of the child, the move to mother in the economic, political, and social sphere can be either empowering or disenfranchising.... Poverty, lack of employment opportunities, lack of parenting support services such as flexible work hours, child care, or even financial assistance, make the endless tasks that are involved in caring for the young child, very difficult. So for women, while they move toward a responsibility that transforms, they are continually faced with the reality of their own "other"-ness in our patriarchal culture. (p. 85)

Bergum suggests that poverty affects the experience of motherhood in various ways, ways that are possibly invisible to those who may study the experience. Researchers must then consider the impact of poverty for some women within the role of motherhood.

In addition to the need to consider the impact of poverty, the impact of living outside of social norms needs to be kept in mind when attempting to understand motherhood in stigmatized situations. Based on the findings of a study of the experience of motherhood for women who are HIV positive, Ingram and Hutchinson (1999) question the dominant theories of mothering that do not speak directly and comprehensively about the experiences of mothers whose lives deviate from the norms of society. Women who operate outside the norms of society, they report, experience lack of recognition regarding their maternal identity--somehow their very experience of motherhood is (un)naturalized. Women, who have been battered, experience many of the same problems. A major impact reported to occur for mothers when—though a partner is violent—her children may be apprehended because she is unable to protect them from the violence (Edleson, 1998). Women are forced to consider their experiences of motherhood and construct their lives within a framework where few possibilities are open to them (Gordon, 1990), and where their experience falls outside of naturalized notions of motherhood.

Although they offer some guidance, decontextualized theories of motherhood are problematic sources of knowledge for professionals working in the health care field. When parenting is removed from its political context, when understanding of parenting is developed through overly focused observational and interpretative studies such as in the case of psychological knowledge of women as mothers (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988), health care workers are left with a narrow understanding of complex problems. Thus, it seems important

to respond to society's presumptions which naturalize motherhood for women by reframing motherhood within the context in which it is experienced.

Battering and Motherhood

A reframing of the context of motherhood to include that of battering seems somehow to oppose the very idealism inherent in the theoretical perspectives of motherhood. This reframing also stands in direct opposition to the ideal of the innocence of children. However, violence is one of global importance: battering affects people of all races, classes, ages, sexes, and abilities, often throughout the life span of the individuals affected (Mosher, 1998; Swift, 1998).

Both women and their children are profoundly affected by the battering. Many women must contend with isolation from friends and family; the informal supports women do receive are unhelpful as often as they are helpful (Lempert, 1997). These same women may have limited access to resources, may live in poverty, and may experience physical and mental health problems alongside or associated with the battering. Children growing up within this violent context are affected by the violence in various but not yet fully understood ways.

Battering

The effects of battering have been widely studied; they are defined as the physical and psychosocial sequelae of abuse (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). These effects may include feeling intimidated, humiliated, and isolated from family; restriction of resources; and threats

to the safety of children. In addition to these effects, women may experience physical assaults. Many of the studies to date have focused on the frequency, incidence, and severity of the physical battering (Smith, Tessaro, & Earp, 1995). The scope of violence against women is wide reaching; one in three Canadian women has experienced battering by a partner (Johnson, 1996). The results of any one of the effects mentioned must have significant consequences; the physical violence alone has long reaching effects.

Battering has a profound effect on the health of women and children; however, the health care response is less than ideal (Varcoe, 1997). The National Survey on Violence Against Women found one-fifth of women who experience battering seek medical attention in Canada (Rodgers, 1994). However, within hospital settings, battering is frequently not recognized as the cause of illnesses including physical injuries. The reasons for the lack of recognition are complex and may include issues such as racism, classism, and negative attitudes towards women (Mosher, 1998; Swift, 1998; Varcoe, 1997).

Not only are women affected by battering, but their children are also known to frequently be battered or to witness violence (Edleson, 1999b; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). In some cases, children of women who are battered require medical attention as a consequence of abuse. For example, children may require hospitalization. Such a hospitalization for a child results in mothers who are battered coming into contact with nurses. Perhaps understandably, the focus for nurses is on the child. Nurses may not have a foundation of understanding from which to care for both the parent who is battered and the child.

Impact on Children who Witness or Experience Battering

As a result of the research on battering against women, extensive research on the healthy development of children who witness battering has also been done (Bennett, 1991; Erickson & Henderson, 1992; Hughes, 1988; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Kolbo, 1996). The various research approaches have led to a wide range of views regarding the health and adaptability of the children at home and at school. The literature available is often contradictory, and, though a wide variety of research has been conducted in this area, the consequences of actually witnessing violence are not well understood. Children who witness the violence against their mothers are too often also the recipients of abuse (Bennett, 1991; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Hughes, 1988; Humphreys, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Kolbo, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Suh & Abel, 1990). However, findings from many of these studies reveal evidence of internalized and externalized problems for children who witness such violence or are the recipients of the violence.

In a Canadian study of 102 children aged 4-16 years old, living in shelters, and from homes where battering occurred, children were rated significantly higher in behaviour problems and lower in social competence than a comparison group of 96 children who came from non-violent homes (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). Because family violence is usually kept a secret, these children tended to be more isolated than their peers; they had fewer out-of-school contacts; and they failed to develop age-appropriate social skills. They

were also more likely to be aggressive and to use drugs and/or alcohol. These findings were supported in subsequent research findings (Hughes, 1988; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Suh & Abel, 1990). It has also been reported that children may develop a limited ability to observe and practice effective, clear communication processes while living in violent homes. Hughes (1988) and Suh and Abel (1990) found that such limited communication skills further thwart a child's developing self-esteem and effective problem-solving abilities.

Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, and Zak (1986) also studied children who returned to shelters with their mothers and found no significant relationship between witnessing violence and behaviour problems indicating that some children may exhibit resilience within their violent environments. Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990) and Straus and Gelles (1986) who studied families in which children were witnessing violence did not find such positive outcomes. In some of these families children actually participated in the battering of their mothers. Straus and Gelles found that such extreme behavioural responses occurred when the child participant identified with the batterer.

Ericksen and Henderson (1992), two nurse researchers, did one of the first qualitative research projects in which children were interviewed about their experience of witnessing violence. They discovered that younger children perceived the battering as normal and acceptable. These children also coped by seeking solitude and disengaged from their family at times into a fantasy world. Some children felt a sense of powerlessness and did not feel

they could talk to their parents about their feelings. Once children grew to adolescence, as found in the Bennett (1991) study, they seemed to have more resources at hand and had a need to integrate their experiences into their lives and to make sense of them in order to "grow stronger and wiser" (p. 437).

Conversely, in a retrospective study involving undergraduate students, Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Bennett and Jankowski (1997) found that witnessing violence as a child resulted in greater psychological distress in later life. This included more internalized difficulties (i.e., anxiety, emotional problems, and depression) more externalized behavioural problems (i.e., aggression, communication problems, and lack of social skills) and a higher level of general psychological distress. In particular, female children of battered mothers may be similarly affected in adolescence or adulthood (Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986).

Other studies (Bennett, 1991; Edleson, 1999a; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Kolbo, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988) have established that children of women who are battered are also much more likely to be direct victims of abuse as well. Of these children, the younger ones are more likely to be physically abused. Preschool children are likely to become withdrawn, subdued, or mute. They are likely to exhibit anxiety and clinging behaviour, to experience nightmares, and to repetitively reenact the event through their play (Knapp, 1998).

Much of the research has been criticized because many of the studies took place while women were living in shelters (Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Angerson, & Sutton,

1991). Fantuzzo et al. argue that including only children from shelters is not a representative sample of the population of children who have experienced or witnessed violence. They contend that the disruption of living without their fathers coupled with being in a temporary residence could possibly cause temporary behaviour problems in these children. Moreover, temporary shelter residence is associated with a distinct set of reported clinical levels of conduct problems, higher levels of internalized emotional problems and the lowest level of social competency and maternal acceptance. Although Fantuzzo et al. critiqued this approach, their findings supported the results of studies conducted with participants in shelters. Regardless, the results from the studies of the effects of violence on children's well being do suggest the possibility that violence has an influence on children's psychological state.

While it is reported that parenting these children presents additional challenges to mothers who are battered themselves (Henderson, 1990, 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a, 1995b), each mother will handle her situation with different sets of skills and resources. In Henderson's (1993) study of nine women who experienced battering, women were found to be "effectively paralyzed" by the problems of their children and had difficulty communicating with their children. Yet, in a subsequent study done by Humphreys (1995a), women whose problems may have seemed insurmountable, overcame the adversity in their lives to protect and nurture their children even when their own safety and health was at risk.

Many children living in violent homes demonstrate a high degree of resilience.

Humphreys (1993) suggested that children who witnessed their mother being battered may still develop healthy relationships and behaviours based on a caring, supportive mother-child relationship. When considering the experience of motherhood in a battering context, we must question whether the relationship between mother and child is affected by the battering itself or by her skills and resources to deal with her children. Although the published research results do not present a consistently coherent picture, children of women who are battered do seem to be at risk for a variety of problems that can affect any of their relationships. Health care professionals, as consumers of this research, must consider these results as significant even as they remain critical of the limitations of each study. Health for children from homes in which battering occurs remains an elusive goal. Regardless of whether children witness or experience battering, it is probable that the mother-child relationship is affected.

Social Responses: Children in the middle

Women who are battered live their lives under unwelcome social scrutiny. Social responses developed to protect people within this society are the same services that can have a tremendously negative impact on a woman's experience of motherhood when battering is an issue and/or is made public. In particular, the civil justice systems, family law, and child protection services present sometimes overwhelming challenges for these mothers.

Child Apprehension

Mothers who are battered will often actively seek safety for their children and themselves (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Henderson, 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a, 1997), sometimes placing the women in hazardous situations. In her study, Hilton found that thirteen of the twenty-four women she studied left the relationship because of the risk that battering posed to their children. The women are left responsible for protecting their children even when they are unable to protect themselves; if they were unable to protect their children, apprehension by child protection services was a possibility.

Child protection workers, with the mandate to operate toward the “best interests” of the child, employ a well-intentioned and child-centred view; however, it is a view that often places concern for children ahead of concern for their mothers, often making matters worse for women and their children (Edleson, 1999a). Edleson contends that social response to children and women have emerged in different systems. He also critiques researchers for focusing either on children or on the woman, never integrating the knowledge. For example, a woman who seeks protection for herself enters into a system that views her life in terms of a context of domestic violence. This scenario forces police to reveal that children live in a house of domestic violence, rather than in a home with one assaultive parent, and child protection workers are then forced to consider removal of those children to a “safer” place. This fragmentation of mandates can impact women and children because services are not collaborative. Thus, if a woman asks for any protection at all she risks losing her children

(Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Even though a partner is responsible for the battering, a mother can be charged with the crime of neglect; further, the mother's name may be used in the case report while the partner is rendered invisible in the documentation (Edleson, 1998; Swift, 1995, 1998).

Once child protection services are connected with a family, whether children are removed or not, social workers then visit women's homes. Mothers are required to be better than good; they must contend with the view of their mothering through someone else's eyes. They cannot risk having insufficient food in the house; they can not make idle and negative comments about or to their children as other mothers often do (Edleson, 1998; Swift, 1998). Indeed, they are not allowed the luxury of caring for their children without other forces shaping their decisions for how they provide care and placing children in the middle of their struggles with the system (Swift, 1995, 1998).

Custody and Access

"Systemic violence" refers to those systems put into operation that disregard the violence in a woman's life while simultaneously applying its rules. For example, typical processes for custody and access keep women in contact with their abusive partners. Legislation such as "mandatory parenting" after divorce neglects the needs of women who have been battered by their child's other parent (Taylor, 1992; Taylor, Barnsley, & Goldsmith, 1996).

Women experience many injustices with regard to custody and access of their children. Some women are forced into contact with the very person they are fleeing—a person who is violent towards them. In the case of those with little social support, researchers have observed that some women may have no choice but to have contact with a man who has battered them because of current laws regarding access to children, despite restraining orders (Taylor, 1992; Taylor, Barnsley, & Goldsmith, 1996; Varcoe, Irwin, & Jaffer, 2000). Women have reported being brought back to court by their abusers on a monthly basis over custody of their child. Such a situation, often imposed by the partner, sometimes by the court, is a kind of continued abuse which not infrequently affects the mother's ability to maintain and hold down a job, causing distress for her children and for herself, and placing her safety in question by repeated contacts with a violent partner (Varcoe, Irwin, & Jaffer).

In these ways, children are pawns; they represent another venue for control of a woman even after she leaves a relationship. Once a woman leaves a relationship, violence has been reported to escalate toward the woman and subsequently the abuser incorporates the children into the acts of violence (Edleson, 1999a; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Swift, 1998). Social response puts children in the middle of the woman's struggles to remain violence-free. Responses such as custody, access and visitation may be effective for women and children who do not live with violence but, once violence enters the context of their lives, the response may fall short of helping women with violent partners.

Social Myth-understandings

The sociocultural context of a woman's life intersects with and shapes her life as a mother. A woman who is battered cannot necessarily predict what prevalent ideologies will inform responses to her, what notions of her life will be imposed upon her and in what ways she will be victimized. Once her private life is made public, the unspoken social response operates to oppress women with misinterpretations of her integrity and her responsibility.

Prevalent Ideologies

No human is immune to the pervasive ideological influences of the social context in which he or she lives. In Western society, gendered discourse—language which is determined by social structures—has created archetypal constructions of women as naturalized into the role of the mother, into a social norm already constructed (Fay, 1999). Mothers who are battered somehow represent a potent foil to these constructions. Yet, such social ideology contributes to a reductionistic and stereotypic image of women who have been battered; while they lie outside prevailing notions of the good mother, they must also be better than good if they want to keep their children. Many women are faced with their behaviours being characterized as learned helplessness but paradoxically for many, they must accept this label and in doing so they are able to exercise agency within the system. Similarly, the phrase 'battered woman syndrome' conjures up the same reductionistic images of women but many women may have to accept the label if they want to enter systems of protection.

The phrases 'the battered woman syndrome' and 'learned helplessness' are used to both protect and attack women. The ideas can be used as part of the defense strategy in legal battles; yet, in the same legal arena, they can be used to create an image of a woman who is unable to care for her children (Fay, 1999). What effect do these persistent images have on women's perceptions of themselves and of their agency? More than just affecting how others view these women, the images influence how women view themselves. Indeed, in the Varcoe and Turris (in review) study, not only were the women influenced by ideologies about battered women, but the researchers found that women "reproduced, resisted and refuted these ideologies and contingencies" (p 7). The perception that women lack the ability or desire to leave, or to protect their children, fostered by these prevalent ideologies, results in further stigma and stereotypes that hold mothers responsible for their children's problems (Mahoney, 1994).

Such ideologies allow, and sometimes invite, injustices to occur to women who have been battered. Socially held ideologies, which do not operate in a vacuum but which require a social context in which they may be practiced, become most effective when dissolved into the language (Fairclough, 1989). Implied negative messages embedded in ideology and language can have a profound effect on women's self-esteem and on her willingness to engage in public struggles to effect change. In particular, the notion of the good mother who has sole responsibility for her children stands against the very experience of being battered. Women who are battered are forced to deal with the ways ideologies shape their personal

interpretations of 'self' and 'self as mother' as well as protector of their children simply because their desire to remain responsible is continually being undermined.

Varcoe and Turris (in review) studied how the social contexts of women had an impact on their experience of being battered. The women talked about how the images of being good mothers affected their decision making, their images of self, and how they responded to the battering. These researchers found that formal support for women was provided that was "contingent upon the women accepting a support provider's definitions of the problem and proscribed solutions" (p.7). Indeed, they had to accept the very language they found stereotypic of their situations. These responses are mirrored in the responses of women I have worked with in an ongoing research study involving women who have been battered (Varcoe, Irwin, & Jaffer, 2000). Some women must develop a savvy to work within the system and this savvy may involve accepting a service provider's solutions. However, many of the women in this study have also resisted the proscribed solutions offered and been creative in finding their own solutions to barriers to care for themselves and their children (Varcoe, Irwin, & Jaffer). Studies such as this remind us that what may seem common sense in treating these women and providing them resources, may also serve to compound their problems (Fairclough, 1989).

Dichotomous Notions of Motherhood

Dichotomies, regardless of what they describe, represent a bi-dimensional understanding of human behaviour; notions of bad mother/good mother and victim/agent are

well documented within the literature concerning women who are battered (Ashe & Cahn, 1994; Mahoney, 1994; Praagh, 1994; Swift, 1995, 1998). The bad mother/good mother labels oversimplify the lives of women who have been battered and minimize their personal agency as they struggle for themselves and their children; while good mothers leave abusive relationships and have agency, bad mothers stay and are victims (Mahoney, 1994). These popular images leave no room for support of the women who exercise agency within victimization or who incorporate victimization into their agency. The dichotomy denies women who experience battering some comfort in at least being viewed as having complex lives.

Within the literature about women who experience battering, the notion of women as only victims is being refuted (Mahoney, 1994; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995) yet remains popular within society and is perpetuated by those who are in positions of power. For example, in the courtroom, lawyers might create a picture of a helpless woman to convince the judge that the woman was unable to prevent the children from being affected by the violence (Fay, 1999). Women, in turn, often must incorporate these notions in order to keep their children.

Moving away from these ideologies and dichotomies in discourse and practice may lead to a better understanding of women's experiences and to a wider range of solutions for women who are battered (Mahoney, 1994). This shift would require a shift away from a

focus on losses, deficits, and pathology toward an interest in the strengths of mothers and families.

A Current Understanding: Motherhood for Women who have been Battered

The experience of motherhood has remained largely unexplored for women who have experienced battering by their partners. What is known about the experience of motherhood within the context of battering is viewed through the lens of concern for the children. This well-intentioned concern for children seemingly has been placed ahead of concern for women. Nevertheless, this growing concern for children has been the impetus for many studies that have helped to illuminate parenting of children who witness battering (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992; Henderson, 1990; 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a). Studies which describe marital discord, quality of parenting (Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985; Holden & Richie, 1991), and parent-child aggression (Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987) offer a beginning understanding of the experience of motherhood for women. Studies that have attended to women's perceptions and their worries about the children who witness the battering have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of motherhood for women who have been battered (Ericksen & Henderson, 1990, 1992; Henderson, 1990; 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a, 1995b). Through such studies, researchers have described women's concerns about their children, women's decision-making process, and begun to describe the nature of their mother-child relationships.

In a study to understand women's perceptions of their children's experience of witnessing battering, Henderson (1993) found that mothers worried about their children's "emotional well-being, their behaviour at home and at school, [and] their attitude to violence"(p. 9). Although women in Henderson's research were aware of the problems, they often did not have the emotional ability to handle their children's demands. The mothers wanted someone else to handle their children's concerns although their children wanted and needed their mothers (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992).

Hilton (1992) conducted a study similar to the work of Henderson (1992, 1993) using a larger sample and found that the perceptions of women who had been abused gave valuable insight into the problem of battering. Women minimized their children's exposure to battering in their reports to others. Hilton found that mothers would deny that their children were witnessing battering until the children had become victims. Some of the women in the study only realized that their children had been witnesses as they recounted their stories of battering to the researcher. Other women indicated concern for their children as reasons for leaving the relationship--reasons which were guided by the thought, "To me, I'm supposed to be the best, best mom" (p. 81).

It is well documented in the literature that women not only stay but also leave relationships for their children. Toward staying, women cite believing their children need two parents (Hilton, 1992), believing that if they leave the violence may escalate, believing that the safety net is ineffective, and/or they will fall into poverty (Varcoe, Irwin, & Jaffer,

2000). Toward leaving, women worried for the safety of their children (Hilton; Humphreys, 1995a, 1997). The standards some women found to be acceptable for themselves when deciding whether to stay or leave did not always apply to themselves as mothers. For example, they might leave the home on account of their children but not necessarily on their own account. Still, for women in the Humphreys (1995a) study, those who stayed for their children became vigilant, they adjusted their own lives, they started to plan for an escape, and, if necessary, they put themselves in danger to protect their children. These same women sought to create order out of the chaos by investing time with their children to show their love even though they felt that they lacked the resources to truly protect themselves. Women's worries about their children included those that are common to all mothers as well as those that are specific to a context that includes abuse by a partner.

Although the literature provides some insight into the experience of mothering for women, it fails to capture the matrix of influences that pervade the lives of women who are battered by their partners. The result of the current approach to research is a gap in knowledge about what it means to be a mother in a violent context. At present we only can describe the characteristics of the experience by piecing together the events, the effects on the children, the social responses, the issues of apprehending the children, and the ideologies and dichotomous notions that shape the experience.

Health care providers have an incomplete understanding of the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered. The focus of this investigation on the

experience of motherhood for women who have been battered will provide nurses with ways of conceptualizing the experience.

Summary

Battering of women represents a significant health problem for Canadian women and children and creates long-term effects (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1990; Johnson, 1996). Nurses and other health care providers in contact with women who have been battered and their children have an opportunity to support women in a unique way. This cannot happen effectively, however, without a foundation for practice that is meaningful to women who have been battered.

Although society has conceptualized battering as an individual problem, we may fail to treat women as individuals. The review of the literature here reveals that society continues to view the battering of women as a "family" problem. 'Domestic violence' continues to be the systemic and societal view of battering—a view that pathologizes the family when a partner is responsible. Until we reconceptualize battering within a patriarchal society as an abuse of power that exists in these relationships, we will continue to support the existing dominant hegemony (Mosher, 1998).

The current literature available on mothering in the context of battering begins to capture the experience of motherhood for women. However, the focus in this area of research has been on mother's worries and decisions they make about their children. This approach has helped nurses to understand how the context of battering shapes women's lives

as mothers. Yet, it falls short of creating a mechanism by which motherhood for women who have been battered can be more fully understood.

If we can further capture the experience of mothering for women who have been battered, these commonly held myth-understandings might be refuted. This study will document the parenting experiences of women who have been battered and contribute to knowledge that informs practice.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

My intention in this study of motherhood for women who have been battered by their partners was threefold. First, I intended the research to make explicit the personal reality of the experience of motherhood for these women. Second, I intended through analysis of the data to extend constructions of motherhood to include the perspectives of women themselves. This research offered an emancipatory process for women to tell their stories in an atmosphere committed to exposing and challenging the prevailing constructions about women who experience battering. Finally, I wanted to develop an understanding of the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered to provide a foundation for nurses to connect themselves to these women and their children. This foundation could serve as one source of guidance for nurses to frame their care and support to enhance women's strengths.

Research Design

The complexity of any human experience requires a methodology that will result in a rich description of the subject area. Qualitative research is warranted when limited literature is available on the question (Burns & Grove, 1993; Creswell, 1998). The available literature on the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered was extremely limited. Munhall and Oiler (1986) also add that a qualitative approach is suitable when a researcher is interested in the individual in context. The nature of my question required that I consider the context of women's lives when trying to understand their experience. For these reasons, I selected qualitative description guided by narrative inquiry as my approach to this study.

As a methodology, narrative inquiry is grounded in the understanding that meaning is contextually situated and co-constructed (Mishler, 1986), and recognizes the tendency of people to narrate or 'to story' (Mishler, 1986; Sandelowski, 1991). Hence, the stories people tell represent a personal reality, which recognizes the narrator's personal and social context (Frank, 1995). It is not the truth value of the story that is the aspect sought; rather, the process of listening to stories helps us to recognize what the research participants choose to tell, how they recounted their stories, and what was of significance to them (Mishler, 1986). The narrative, as a mode of inquiry, provides the participant with space for reflection within the interview process (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998).

Throughout the telling of their stories for this study, participants spoke freely and reflected on their positions or points of view. The women's narratives were created within a particular context and were a means by which the women could interpret and create meaning in their lives (Mishler, 1986). While a formal narrative inquiry would focus attention on the narrative itself, my application of this approach allowed me to contextualize women's accounts of their experiences as constructed narratives that reflect their attempts to make sense of their lives as mothers. My interpretations of the women's narratives were informed by a postmodern and feminist philosophical approach whose implications will be discussed later in this chapter.

Sample Selection

The data collected for this study consisted of interviews with a sample of women who self-defined as mothers who had been battered by their partners. This selection of a particular

sample of mothers included women who were mothers to their biological children. One woman in this study continued to care for an adopted stepdaughter after she left her abusive relationship.

Method of Sampling

Purposive sampling guided the selection of participants for this study. Purposive sampling required including individuals who were best able to tell a story that informed the research question (Mishler, 1986). For this reason, sampling proceeded in a manner to ensure that this process enhanced my understanding of the research question. The sampling included women who are mothers and who have been battered by their partners. The women chosen for this study were at various points in the process of living with battering. All of the women in this study had left their abusive partners.

Women experienced many influences that intersected upon their experiences, all of which were important to understand. Therefore, attempts were made to gain access to a diverse population of women. For instance, the study included the experiences of two women who were in hiding from a violent partner. All the women experienced living in poverty for at least a period of time. Two women still have financial difficulties. One of the women immigrated to Canada to marry her partner. She was well educated and spoke English. She spoke of experiencing isolation because of her immigration.

I intended to start my sampling with the members of an action research group consisting of women who have been battered. However, the women in this group did not volunteer to be interviewed. One of the women from the initial group who had connections to women who have

been battered used word of mouth to gain access to other women. I chose a sample that was diverse in nature from this expanded population based on the data that emerged from the initial interview analysis.

Human Subject's Approval

Approval for research with human subjects was obtained from the University of British Columbia Research Ethics Committee. The participants in the project were not affiliated with any organization that required additional approval from other governing bodies. The women in this study participated freely and any recruitment strategies that might be conceived as coercive were carefully avoided.

Procedure for Approaching Participants

For this study, women were approached on the basis of word-of-mouth, snowball techniques (Morse & Field, 1995). Women who were willing to tell their stories of their experience of motherhood volunteered to be interviewed. Participants were given the researcher's telephone number, and, at the time of initial contact, the study was explained to each potential participant. The potential participant was given an information letter explaining the study (Appendix A).

Sample Size

I anticipated interviewing six to eight participants for this study. This population of women proved difficult to access. Three of the women who had agreed to participate in this study withdrew. One withdrew because of the painful nature of the topic and two withdrew

because of various time commitments and court appearances related to the violence in their lives. The total number of participants also depended on the quality of the interviews themselves. The five women in this study provided rich, comprehensive stories of their experiences of motherhood. This sample size was assessed on an ongoing basis in consultation with my thesis committee and the five women who were interviewed twice provided sufficient data for this study. In qualitative description, sample size is not based on the concept of saturation (Sandelowski, 1994). Guided by the narrative approach, while a researcher may not be able to claim to have heard every detail around an experience, the focus develops around common stories that come to life during the process of analysis.

Data Collection

Data Sources

The primary sources of data in this research were the interviews with women. Field notes were completed after each interview to capture contextual elements of the interview and the essence of the interview from my own perspective.

The Interview Process

Mishler (1986) contends that, within the research interview, a social interaction occurs in which researcher and participants jointly construct a discursive exchange. Meanings are grounded in their context and analysis and interpretations are based on jointly constructed understandings. In this study, each woman was encouraged to tell her story in her own way and at her own pace. Although interviews remained flexible, they were loosely guided by a set of

questions designed to provide focus and direction according to the research question (see Appendix B). A broad, introductory research question assisted the women to enter into a conversation with the interviewer. Women in this study were active in the dialogue throughout the interviews (Oakley, 1982). Probes and prompts were used to assist the participants to enrich and extend their stories (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998).

This study consisted of two interviews with participants—an initial interview and a follow-up interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient for the women, and the setting was chosen to ensure privacy for participants and to minimize any interruptions. Four of the five women chose to be interviewed in their own homes. One woman chose to be interviewed at an office where safety and privacy were ensured. Safety was a concern for these women whether or not they were currently living within a violent relationship. With this in mind, participants were asked about their personal safety as well as the security they felt about their choice of interview site. The guidelines and principles developed by Paterson, Gregory and Thorne (1999) were used to ensure adequate safety was present for the researcher and participant.

At the beginning of the initial interview, informed consent forms (Appendix C) were discussed and signed before the interview began. Demographic data forms were completed by participants after informed consent was obtained (Appendix D). I assisted participants with filling out the demographic form when necessary. Initial interviews were approximately one to two hours in length. One woman's interview lasted three hours. The second follow-up interview

lasted approximately thirty minutes to one hour and it took place approximately two months after the first interview. The second interview focused on sharing my preliminary analysis with the women and provided an opportunity for them to clarify or expand on these findings. The second interview added depth to the existing analysis by allowing women to be active in the construction and validation of meaning. The women agreed with the preliminary analysis and extended and clarified existing interpretations. One woman said, "You have really encompassed my experience" when I returned to her with the preliminary analysis. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, and I checked every transcript with the tape recording to ensure accuracy. All names and identifying information were removed from transcripts and original tapes were destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in a systematic fashion guided by general principles of qualitative description (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997) and recommendations for the identification and interpretation of narratives (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Mathieson & Barrie, 1998; Mishler, 1986). The general procedure for data analysis involved immersion in the verbatim accounts to develop a sense of themes within each account and patterns between and among the narratives. As such patterns and themes emerged, tentative conceptual codes were added to help organize analysis and synthesis of the ideas. Developing interpretations of patterns and themes were used to consider similarities between and variations among the narratives of these women. Using this process, an interpretive

description of the phenomenon of parenting in the context of an abusive relationship based on the women's narratives emerged.

Effort was made to provide a contextual and experiential view focusing on the perceptions of individuals as they live their lives. Throughout the process of analysis I also paid attention to the structure of each theme, the content of each theme and the interpersonal factors involved in the interview interaction. The analysis of structure in each theme focused on how women constructed their stories of motherhood—what they chose to tell and what they chose to omit. The analysis of content for each theme focused on the meanings and identities of motherhood. The analysis of interpersonal factors focused on the effects of interviewee-interviewer relationship and power relation involved in an interview process—acknowledging the researcher's role in construction of the meaning.

Feminist Perspective

A feminist perspective to analysis was adopted for this study. Race, class, ethnicity, education, age, gender, ability and more all interact to influence what was told, what I heard, and how I approached the analysis. A woman's experience may be shaped and magnified by variables such as poverty and race; to see this experience centrally through gender would reduce the multiple and intersecting variables that shape a women's experience of motherhood. Although much feminist research places gender at the centre of inquiry, foregrounding gender is only one of many factors that intersects within a woman's life; a gender-centred perspective proved insufficient as the lens through which the many aspects of the stories should be viewed.

However, a particular feminist perspective which takes these intersecting variables into account provided a useful tool for bringing “invisibility and distortion” of the female experience into view (Lather, 1991, p. 71). I, therefore, looked beyond gender when taking a feminist approach to the data. For example, I attempted to create explanations that parallel the complex lives that women live, and I resisted explanations that constituted a universal or single ideal of motherhood.

Feminist researchers are committed to examining the relationship between researcher and the researched. Feminists often place themselves in the research process as factors in knowledge development. My analysis included consideration of the interview context and the effects of the power imbalances possible between researcher and participant.

If a researcher were to adopt an uncritical and romantic notion of motherhood, the analysis could easily perpetuate the oppression of women. The findings of the research could have reduced the complexity of participant’s lives simply by excluding or overlooking the notion that the interviewer shapes the context of the interview and holds the lens upon what is and is not seen. I tried to remain open to all the possibilities of a woman’s experience and paid attention to the constraints on life so often taken for granted by the speaker and listener (Riessman, 1993).

Postmodern perspective

A postmodern sensitivity views knowledge as participatory, anti-hierarchical, and found in multiple sites. This study sought to understand motherhood from the point of view of these mothers. I attempted to construct knowledge by reflecting on the women’s unique experiences,

and I abandoned an either/or mode of thinking. My postmodern perspective influenced the data analysis in that I was sensitive to the changing nature of the knowledge produced. While I was sensitive to the constructed nature of the product of this research, I strove toward not becoming caught up in analysis to the exclusion of the reality of women's lives. I felt obligated to produce coherent and sensible accounts of the lives of the women. Postmodernism sees gender as multiple and various as well as co-constructed with race, class, ability, and other identities. As the mothers in this study spoke to me, I attempted to hear the contradictions among the perspectives revealed in the stories and the realization of the dynamic and fluid quality of their lives. My task was to render these visible in a way that did justice to the intersecting influences on women's lives.

Rigor

In qualitative research, the main objective is not related to capturing the so-called historical truth regarding women's accounts of motherhood, for one may describe an event variably in different contexts. "(R)eality is assumed to be multiple and constructed", therefore, describing one reality may be done in many different ways (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 3). To guide this research toward trustworthiness in this qualitative study, Lather's (1991) framework was used. I employed three components of this framework, triangulation, construct validity, and face validity.

Triangulation

According to Lather (1991), triangulation is critical in establishing trustworthiness. This means that the research must move beyond the use of multiple data sources and seek counter and convergent patterns in the data to establish credibility.

Oral stories change over time; they become different in different contexts, depending on to whom they are offered (Ellis, 1997; Riessman, 1993). Although stories may change over time, making claims for the trustworthiness of interpretations was of utmost importance to this research. I attempted to ensure trustworthiness by using data such as field notes, considering critical media events that may affect a woman's story, and theoretical perspectives that may have biased the data. I also "consciously utilized designs which sought counter patterns as well as convergence" in the data with the assistance of my committee members (Lather, 1991, p. 67).

Construct Validity

Construct validity addresses the credibility of the emerging interpretation of the data—the extent to which the interpretation is true to the data, utilizes various theoretical approaches, and sustains attention to the complexity of human experience. One way to enhance construct validity is to engage in reflexivity. A researcher must be aware of personal biases and ask critical questions of the research process. I chose this area of investigation because of my deep commitment to women and children who experience battering. This choice in itself was fraught with personal and political biases; thus in the process of questioning and uncovering any personal biases that I might impose upon the data analysis, I used the assistance of my thesis

committee as well as a personal reflection journal to assist in recognizing such biases were accounted for in the interpretive processes.

Face Validity

Face validity is linked to the immediate recognition that people have when they identify with the description at hand (Lather, 1991). The issue of face validity became evident when my emerging interpretation of the data rang true for the women participants. Reissman (1993) refers to this as correspondence and views the process of returning to the participants as an important source of theoretical insight. Lather posits that if researchers do not return to the participants and consider refinements in light of their reactions, the findings may be invalid. The usefulness of member checks such as this have been debated within the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1993). Sandelowski (1993) cautions that taken to extremes in the interest of representation, this form of refinement can paralyze the research. When research is done without attention to the power relations of researcher and researched, false positives may occur when participants agree with findings to please the researcher or conversely, participants may disagree with the abstractions that are developed because they do not represent the participant's personal reality. These cautions were considered throughout the process of analysis within this study. In keeping with a feminist perspective, however, I believed the women's voices within the analysis should be heard and the value of refinement justified this effort. Although the women agreed with my interpretations, returning to the participants resulted in refinement of my interpretations.

The second interviews opened up new opportunities for dialogue to enhance and expand my findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in a study of this nature were of utmost importance. The women in this study were adequately informed not only of the nature and purpose of the study but also of the potential consequences of reliving possibly painful experiences of motherhood. It is well known that women who are battered face many daily challenges. The women who chose to participate in this study understood prior to consenting to their involvement that this study only involved telling their stories of motherhood. However, I anticipated that they would offer stories of abuse critical to their stories of motherhood.

Qualitative nurse researchers are faced with the possibility that information of a criminal nature will emerge from their interactions with participants. Engaging in qualitative research always opens the researcher to such a possibility. Robinson and Thorne (1988) posit that the dynamic nature of qualitative research sometimes leads both the researcher and participants into situations wherein the agreement of confidentiality no longer protects the participant's privacy. If a woman told a story that included information about her children being abused, then the researcher would be obligated to report that information. Although it may be stereotypic to assume that this population, more than another, may disclose information about illegal activity for example, information regarding ongoing abuse of children—premeditation on what my actions would be in such a situation was of utmost importance. Women in this study did not

reveal any experiences of ongoing child abuse. Should I have needed to disclose information a participant had offered, I would have needed to consider the context of the situation and in consultation with my thesis committee, attempted to take actions that proved a minimum of harm to the participant and all involved. I was prepared to provide referral to social support services to assist women and their children given that conversations may have caused women to rekindle difficult emotions. Positive feedback from our action research group members—those who have accessed the services—would result in the choice of social support service being thoughtfully made if these services were required.

Informed Consent

The women in the study, all of whom had a story to tell, participated in this study on a voluntary basis after receiving both verbal and written explanations of the study. No direct benefit was gained for participating. The explanation they received included a description of the purpose of the study, the process of interviewing and transcribing of results, and the proposed dissemination of results. Prior to commencing with the interviews, the women were asked to read and sign a consent form indicating their willingness to participate and their understanding of the project. In consideration of the above discussion on ethical considerations, I reminded my participants of my obligation to report any revealed ongoing abuse of children. When describing the study I included a statement such as, "While your confidentiality and anonymity is protected, if you provide information about ongoing abuse either to your children, or by, you, it is my responsibility to report it to the appropriate authorities". The women were aware that at any

point they may withdraw from the study without jeopardy to their current or future health care and social services.

Confidentiality

The dynamic and uncertain nature of qualitative study made maintaining confidentiality difficult. When a study's sample size is small, for example, the descriptions of the data and the selected information may point to individuals involved in the study. Measures such as the removal of identifying details were used to ensure confidentiality for all that consented to participate in the study. Confidentiality was discussed with each participant prior to the commencement of the interviews. Women were reminded that an interview would remain confidential unless information was revealed that obliged me to report ongoing child abuse.

Interviews took place in private settings that were chosen by the participant. I had sole access to the names of all participants and all audiotapes and transcripts were kept in separate, locked cabinets. The real names of participants are not connected with the interviews, as the women selected code names. The papers containing the identification of participants with their code names were kept separately from the data, in a locked cabinet to which only I will had access. The participants were assured that, if at any time they felt uncomfortable with anything that was included in the tape recordings, they were free to have it deleted from the transcript. I also ensured that the stories were changed in their details to protect the participants' identities. All identifying information in the transcript was removed to create a clean copy of the transcript.

Once a clean copy of the transcripts was checked for accuracy with the audiotapes, I destroyed the tapes.

Representation

My concerns with fair and sensitive representation permeated this entire project. In this study, the representation of women was rooted within a postmodern and feminist philosophy. This perspective is characterized by an appreciation for the subjective and interpretive nature of reality (Mitchell, 1996) and facilitates a broader and deeper understanding of the complexities of everyday human life (Lister, 1997).

Although narratives represent the perspective of an individual speaker, analysis of narratives from a feminist or postmodern perspective can also reveal various practices of power, such as gender and racial inequities "that may be taken for granted by individual speakers" (Reissman, 1993, p. 5). Thus, the researcher using these approaches must acknowledge the power relations between the researcher and the researched. This relationship was considered when representing women's stories in text. A goal of this feminist research was to be reflexive about these relations and resist appropriating the women's stories that reinforce dominant ideologies (Opie, 1992). As mothers, the women in the study were subjected to many judgements with regards to their private lives. The women in this study were made fully aware of my intentions as a researcher; and I remained reflexive and cognizant of the potential for appropriation. I stayed grounded in the data and used the women's words when representing their experiences.

Limitations to the Study

The limitations of this study were related to data sources. Some women who have been battered by their partners may not have been included because they did not have access to a telephone; because they lacked access to child-care during interviews; or because they were not ready or willing to discuss such private issues. The study included those women who wanted to tell their stories at this time, and such a selection may have resulted in a sample of women at a particular point in the process of the experience of battering. Although all of the women in this study had left the relationship, they were at various points in the process of leaving. Women had lived between one and fifteen years as single parents. The woman who left her abusive relationship fifteen years ago is the only woman in this study that is remarried.

The stories were retrospective, and so some of the detail may have been lost. Detail may also have been lost because of the nature of violence as a difficult topic of conversation. A statement in the preamble—that information regarding ongoing abuse of children obliged me to report it—may have limited a participant's willingness to tell her story in its entirety. Despite these shortcomings, the women who participated were willing to tell their stories and contributed to a rich data source.

Summary

The design for this study was based on qualitative interpretive approaches informed by narrative inquiry as well as feminist and postmodern theorizing. This general approach guided sample selection, data collection, data analysis and decisions about rigor and representation. By

analyzing the stories of women's lives in relation to mothering, in a context of battering, the complexities inherent in this context were illuminated (Ashe & Cahn, 1994). My task was to move women's stories from the margins to a more central position, and toward affecting a more effective understanding for nursing practice when dealing with women who are mothers that have been battered.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Narrative is a linguistic device that serves to organize human experience. A person uses narratives to try to make sense of his or her world in a creative manner. For women in this study, narratives were a mechanism for organizing and interpreting their violent lives. The remembering leads to constructions of women's lives that reflect their multiple realities as presently understood by the women. The women in this study used stories to assess retrospectively their situations of living with violent partners and to develop rational understandings for their own actions.

Women told stories of making responsible and reasonable decisions with regard to their children's welfare. Simultaneously, women used narratives to understand parenting children through the violence. This connection was one that allowed them to understand themselves, and therefore helped me as the researcher to understand them as mothers. Each woman in this study told her story from a standpoint of living violence-free at this time. This vantage point allowed each woman distance from her story, and yet allowed her to recall events that had been highly distressing in her life.

The Women

Throughout this research project I struggled with my own concerns over how to best represent the women's stories of motherhood. In work such as this, it is inevitable that the stories will be altered by virtue of the limitations of textual reconstruction. Not only are the

paralinguistic features lost in the text but the emotion with which women told their stories is also diminished.

This research is about these five women and the generous gift they have offered the reader. For this reason, I feel compelled to bring you closer to the women in this study by offering you a story of my own from the interviews. In three of the interviews children's voices could be heard in the background of the tape. These playful voices served as a potent contrast to the stories being recounted by the women. Two of the interviews were interrupted several times when women's children entered the room in need of their mother. Mom would get the drink, fix the disagreement between siblings, or promise to go and buy that goldfish as soon as we were done. Each woman seemingly moved easily from her marked distress in recounting her story to being present for her children. The children seemed unaware of their mother's pain. I couldn't help but wonder if this skill was used in protecting her children from the violence in their lives.

Each of the women in this study chose code names that were of significance to them: Cathryn, Freedom, Diane, Robin, and Dixon. After hearing the stories associated with each name, calling each woman a 'participant' in the study no longer seemed just; these self-chosen names help to make explicit the struggles and challenges of each woman throughout this chapter. Even though using each woman's name renders each woman in the story visible, my hope is that you will not be inclined to reduce her life to the story of her abuse through my words. Each woman in this study was a unique person that deserves to have her personal story described. I

have taken a snapshot view of their lives to help you, the reader, understand their stories within the context of who these women are as mothers, teachers, businesswomen, partners and so on.

Catherine is a professional who rebuilt her life after leaving her partner “with seven boxes” and her two children. She is remarried and is now a proud grandmother. Catherine expressed that the way she is as a grandmother is what she wishes she could have been as a mom. Catherine put herself through school since leaving her partner and has recently gone back into postgraduate education. Catherine intends to help women like herself and is actively seeking ways to improve others’ lives. Freedom is a woman who described herself as a “confident businesswoman.” She is currently on disability benefits as a result of the violence in her life. She has one child although she would love to have more children. She is content and happy in defining herself and her daughter as family. Freedom has discovered “the artist inside” and is very excited about bringing these qualities to her child. Diane worries about not having enough time for her children. She has four children and they are very active. Diane is working with a women’s group to help decrease the barriers to living violence-free within her community. Robin has strong family values and is concerned about how much time she has left for herself after caring for her two children. She looks to the future when she can think of herself, but for now career and children take up most of her time. Robin came to Canada as a well-educated woman and maintained a career throughout the violence in her life. Dixon is a mother of two who remains in hiding from her partner. She is actively involved with her children and, like

Robin, is concerned about her lack of time for herself. Dixon loves being a mother, and, for now, her career is on hold.

For the purpose of creating a picture of women's experiences of motherhood, the common threads in women's stories are organized here into five themes. Women talked about the context of abuse in which they came to understand their experiences of motherhood. These experiences were set up against an ideal of motherhood, an ideal held by many women. However, the violence in women's lives had implications that somehow altered how women parented their children. Women developed their own strategies to manage the violence and told stories of their lives as they carried on in the aftermath of violence.

The Context of Abuse

Although I was interested in women's stories of motherhood, the women found the abuse in their lives so powerfully linked to motherhood that they were drawn to tell stories of the abuse in their lives. One woman attempted to start her story of motherhood, stopped short and said, "I can't think of motherhood without thinking of the violence in my life." Stories of motherhood, for the women in this study, were thus juxtaposed and interwoven with stories of violence. Because the relative freedom women were experiencing now allowed them the power to speak, their stories shifted quickly to those of abuse. I came to realize I needed to understand their experiences of abuse in order to understand their experience of motherhood.

The women began to tell their stories of living with abuse in various ways. Ultimately, they all talked about the first episode of violence. As each of the women unraveled the context

of violence, an image of the partner and his parenting style was created. Through the excerpts given below, the reader is allowed a glimpse of the contradictory nature of these relationships, each in its own way marked by a confusion of what the women referred to as bliss and terror.

Stories of Violence

In thinking about mothering in the context of abuse, all of the women in the study recalled when and how the abuse started, often contradicting themselves as to whether the abuse was always present or whether it began in pregnancy or early parenting. For all of these women, the abuse became a major issue when they became mothers. From their perspective, they awakened to the abuse in a new way once children were introduced to the family.

In describing their experiences of abuse, some of the women found it difficult to know where to begin. For some, the awareness that there was violence in their lives was gradual and insidious. In some instances, they wondered whether the abuse was simply a series of disconnected episodes. For Diane, the abuse started with "just minor things like slapping, hitting, and pushing." Similarly, Dixon, who was commonly raped by her partner, found the beginning of the abuse within her relationship imperceptible. She explained, "it was so subtle." These incidents of abuse were intertwined with emotional attacks and practices of intimidation against the women. Freedom talked about how her partner would "intimidate" her as a form of controlling her behaviour; "He would take things that were important to me and smash them or take a knife to furniture that my grandmother had given me". The acts of violence and the emotional abuse the women spoke of were incredibly damaging to their self-esteem. Cathryn

talked about the emotional abuse in her life and wondered whether the quality of that abuse differed from physical abuse. She said, "I remember feeling the hurt and the pain and the battering [of] emotional abuse, and I was never hit or punched or kicked, but I was always emotionally hurt and made to feel really horrible about myself." Although the gradual onset of the abuse was often confusing, the women eventually came to recognize that they were being abused. As Dixon said, "I know now that that was violent", when describing a verbal attack by her partner.

The women's stories of abuse all included an escalation of intensity over time. In hindsight, the women were able to perceive a distinct departure from what was previously a relatively peaceful relationship. Included in all of the women's stories were accounts of how they felt their behaviour somehow initiated the violence. Freedom talked about the escalation of violence when her partner, who had a black belt in karate, came into her space as a form of intimidation. When he pinned her down, she pushed him. "It was as if at that point he had license to just beat me up." For some women the violent episodes were too frequent to recall the specifics. As Robin said, "there's been so many police cases where he has hit me and you know, almost [knocked] my eye out and ... he'll beat me, he'll try choking me." For others, the incidents they remembered and chose to relate were the particularly horrible ones. Diane's story also started out with abuse that was at first subtle. It shifted in intensity when her partner started "whaling on me and choking. Choking was his favourite, choke until you passed out." Diane did go on to tell the story of an episode of physical abuse that lasted over two days before she was

able to call the police. In this story, she said a neighbour had seen her partner drag her into the house by her hair, Diane hoped that the neighbour would call the police:

He threw me across the room. By that time, I was just so dizzy I didn't know what was going on. I was kind of knocked out ... he just threw me in [the kitchen], sliding across the floor and I remember thinking ... there's no way out.

Eventually Diane herself called the police who took her and her children to a transition house where she stayed for a month until she was able to get herself established and feel safe.

Two of the women in the study talked about sexual abuse in their marriages. Both Dixon and Diane experienced sexual abuse in their marriages, a concept they both found difficult to reconcile. Dixon talked about being raped.

I realized that hey, you know, I asked him to stop and he wasn't stopping. He became really aggressive, you know, during intercourse and he just wouldn't stop. I couldn't breathe, I was face down on the bed. I was trying to breathe, and he wouldn't stop, and I was very frightened.

Diane talked about being raped in front of her child and still not believing that this could happen in a marriage:

I never thought. You know, you're married, it's not [rape]. That was a nightmare in itself. Especially being raped in front of the youngest who would have been four, three or four at the time ... she still remembers it to this day.

Although all the women had many stories of violence in their lives, the first violent episode was particularly relevant to the issue of their parenting. Although for many of the women the initial violence occurred before they had children, the first pregnancy seemed to be an event that established a particularly memorable context. Violence during pregnancy and

motherhood represented a meaningful shift in abuse that had previously been present in their lives. Cathryn talked about how her partner was verbally abusive. She said, "when I did get pregnant we had been married for about six months and right away he started calling me names and, you know, prego and fatty and all sorts of horrible things, and when I went in to have her I only weighed 125 pounds." Robin also talked about how the violence had always been in her marriage, but she also said the first time there was physical violence was when she was pregnant:

The violence has been there in my marriage since I could recall.... When we got married it was there. I was pregnant with my first son and that was the first time he hit me. I was seven months pregnant at the time and he kicked me in my stomach ... I was really protective of my child.

Robin talked about being protective of her child, and her stories were centered on her concern for her children. She was isolated from family, and her partner's family was unsupportive. Freedom talked about how the violence in her life escalated once she was pregnant. She said, "Throughout that time the violence escalated throughout my pregnancy.... It was starting to become so abusive, and I think back to those times, I think, why didn't I leave?" Freedom's question of why she didn't leave was a question that was evident in all of the women's stories. For many women, at some point, the only possible escape they could envision was death. Robin said, "the only way I would get out of this house is if I die". Each of the women felt incapable of acting to change their situation at some point in their relationships.

Living with an Abusive Partner

When the women told their stories of violence, they also revealed a great deal about the abuser as a parent. The relationships with these partners were all characterized by periods of blissful happiness as well as by distinct times of terror. Some of the women contemplated leaving many times. Some left once and stayed away. Others left and returned to their partners on many occasions and for various reasons. Some of the women took on the responsibility for their violent marriages and believed that there was something they could do to change their partner or change his responses by censoring their own behaviour. When the relationship didn't change women blamed themselves for the violence.

Abuser as Parent

All of the women in this study chose to talk about their partner's parenting abilities in polite terms; they related their perceptions of their partners as objectively as they could. Robin said, "He's never been a parent...I don't mean to insult him ... but he was never there in the kids' lives." Robin had many stories revealing how her partner's lack of parenting skills affected her children. She said, "I'll come home and he will be passed out." This was one of a several occasions in which Robin had to rush home from work because of a fear for her children. Robin was dependent on her partner's parenting. She spoke of her worries that Social Services might apprehend her children because her partner forced her to work but was unreliable as a parent. Diane, Cathryn, and Dixon also talked about how their partners were entirely unsupportive of them. Dixon said, "My husband was no help [with the children]." Cathryn talked about having

post partum illness which put her into the hospital for two months. She said, "When I did have [the baby], there was absolutely no support on his part at all."

Although some of the women clearly recognized their partner's limited parenting ability, others found that telling their stories of motherhood exposed a new understanding of their partner as a parent. For example, Freedom realized at the end of our interview that the partner she had described as being a "loving father", was, upon reflection problematic. "He appears on the surface to be a good father, but I don't believe a good father does the stuff that he does." Cathryn told a similar story about how her partner was a good father who didn't interfere with her parenting. "He really didn't interfere with the way that I parented or mothered my children because he also was never really a horrible father. I have to say, that, if anything, he is a good father to them." However, throughout our interview, the stories started to change when she realized that he had verbally abused the children. Near the end of our interview Cathryn stopped herself at one point and said, "I say that I remember him starting to be abusive towards them, or not abusive. See I'm saying, 'no, he wasn't abusive.' But he was abusive." Women's perceptions of their partners were thus often challenged and deconstructed through the telling of their stories.

Patterns of Staying and Leaving

The women recounted stories characterized by confusion. For many, the blissful times they spoke of were brief interludes in their lives. From their current perspective the story of their lives with their partner was shaped by the terror. Sometimes, the periods of terror explained their

times of leaving the relationship, while the periods of bliss were often presented as a rationale for staying or for returning to a partner that they also loved.

Four of the five women recounted times within their marriages when life was wonderful with their partners. For some, these times were also associated with a particularly horrible story of abuse. Dixon told of being raped by her partner. After this rape she told her partner she wanted out of the relationship. She wanted a family and he seemed to want a life of partying and sexual fantasy. Her partner then begged her to stay and agreed to start a family with her.

Dixon's first child was stillborn. She remembered,

I thought things had gone well for awhile—there's been no abuse from the moment we got pregnant all the way through. Everything seemed to be really good, and, I thought, well, maybe that's what we needed. We needed to become a family and things would be all right.

Although their life seemed to have taken a turn for the better, while on vacation grieving for her son, he raped her again. It was "awful for fifteen minutes and then it would be over and it would be like it never happened...I knew it wasn't right. I just didn't know what to do because he was so apologetic, and he'd be so generous and so kind." The pattern of happy family life and sexual abuse would repeat itself, leaving Dixon confused and unhappy but also committed to the family. Like Dixon, the other women harboured hope for their relationships even when something was noticeably going wrong. Diane told of how they moved from the city when her relationship was failing because of the abuse. Her partner promised their relationship would improve and Diane

agreed to the move. Before long, she realized that the country meant isolation for her and her children:

But his explanation for that would be, things will be better.... more country, more family-oriented. It'd be nicer out there. Things, the relationship will be better. That was a dream. Because now he had total isolation.

Freedom experienced physical abuse throughout her pregnancy and planned to leave her partner once the baby was born. Freedom questioned why she didn't leave the relationship earlier, and yet cites many times when her partner was wonderful to her after her baby's birth:

He became his old self again. He was quite happy for awhile there and very attentive. He took three months off work with banked vacation time. While I was at school he would run [our daughter] up to my class so I could breastfeed her, in between classes. Some classes I took her to the class with me and, you know, he was wonderful.

The women in this study lived with men who were very remorseful for their actions and who made their lives difficult to interpret. Women talked about the confusing nature of their lives, how the episodes of terror were difficult to make sense of in the relationship and how the episodes of bliss made them want to work it out.

The life of terror eventually became too much for the women in this study. Robin, Diane, and Freedom each told stories of leaving and then returning to the relationship. These particular women returned to their partners because of family pressure, safety issues and stability for their children. Robin told of living apart from her partner many times in the 15-year relationship, and how leaving meant giving up her family and community each time. Robin felt pressure because

her partner garnered support from family and friends for her return. She talked of one particular incident during which she felt isolated:

That time I actually had lived on my own. I have done this so many times. I would get away, I would try and to finish it off and say that I will never want to be with this man again. And then pressures from him, pressures from his family, pressures from society, you know, from in my culture. It's not something acceptable.... You must have some sort of weakness if you're walking away.

Many of the partners in this study used some form of intimidation to get the women to return home. Diane revealed how she returned quickly when he "threatened my parents and so I just went back [to him]." Freedom also spoke of having limited choices because her partner would not give up their family home. She "slept in the car a few nights" with her daughter and ended up back with her partner because her choices remained limited by her poverty. When away, Freedom's partner begged her to return and promised he would change his behaviour.

Both Dixon and Cathryn left once and did not return to their partners, but both women reflected on how easy it would be to return. They said they understood how women would go back to their partners. Dixon said, "I could see how I would've been coaxed back into trying one more time. I still wanted to give him the chance to redeem himself." Cathryn, too, considered returning:

Well, it's really very difficult to go from having delicious food on your table and, you know, being able to buy your children nice clothes and nice things to having absolutely nothing.... It's very, very degrading, and it almost caused me to go back because it would have been easier.

Cathryn's story ended with the reflection that returning to her partner would have been easier than to endure the poverty every day. Not all the women returned to their abusive partners, but all understood why going back might be easier.

Personal Costs of Violence

For the women in this study, the personal costs of mothering in a violent relationship involved feeling responsible for a failing relationship, emotional distress, loss of self-esteem, loss of hopes and sometimes physical bodily damage. The women told of the person they remembered being prior to the violence. All of the women were able to find vestiges in their lives of that person, but the overarching tone of their stories was of loss and sadness. Women experienced self-blame for the abusive events in their lives and this self-blame was often tinged with thoughts of "if only I worked harder."

The women in this study talked of feeling responsible for keeping the family together. They wondered if they could have done something different to make things work. Dixon said, "I just played the martyr, and I just tried to balance out everything". She worried about her children and all that they would be giving up if she left the relationship. She said,

I was at my breaking point, so I carried it for as long as I could, thinking, well, I'm doing the right thing, letting them know they get to go [on holidays], my kids got to go to Montessori preschool. I thought how can I give all this up for them? You know, somehow I have to find a way to make it work. Maybe I can find a counselor who can change him, there must be some other thing that I can do, something that I've not thought of yet.

Cathryn also felt the guilt of leaving her relationship. She said, "Sometimes I feel like I took them away from a connected family, and I wonder what it would have been like for them if I had been married to someone that I could have stayed with." Women took on responsibility for the relationship even when their partner was the one in control of the violent acts. The toll the responsibility took on women was evident in the subsequent costs to themselves.

The women spoke of experiencing depression and having suicidal thoughts and attempts. All of the women in this study spoke of being depressed. Robin talked about her self esteem as being eroded "because of the constant putdowns and like all the things you have to deal with, not just so much physical abuse—that heals—mental abuse [to] the self esteem." For many, the erosion of self-esteem resulted in depression. Cathryn was profoundly affected by the abuse of her partner. She elaborated on the "feeling of having a black hole" in her soul in the following segment:

It's a fear. It's an anger. It's sadness. It's pain. It's everything all mixed up together, and I don't think you really even know what you're feeling after. And it's just black, and it's so heavy, and you could just cry. But you feel so empty and black.

Cathryn, Robin, Freedom, and Diane all spoke of suicide throughout their stories of motherhood.

Robin talked about how she eventually overcame the suicidal thoughts:

I was suicidal at times. I tried committing suicide at times because I couldn't handle it.... I'm alive today, and I have not killed myself in this family.... My family told me that I was a survivor.

Although many of the women talked about depression, Cathryn chose to leave her relationship when she was suicidal because she felt her children would be better off. She said, "It's like a light went on in me again that, they cannot have a mother. And what would that be like for them to live a life without a mother instead of two parents that are apart."

In recollecting their stories of the abuse in their lives, each of the women was transported to a time before the relationship. Women reflected on who they were prior to the abuse. The person Robin recalled being was "a happy person, very alive." To cope with being abused, each quickly learned to live in "harmony" with their partners, and that meant changing who they were. Freedom too noticed a change in who she was; she conceptualized her loss "as a slow giving away of self". For Dixon, the loss of self was reflected in the eyes of her daughter. She said despite her efforts to put on a "happy face," her daughter "would notice" and say, "Oh mum, you don't smile anymore." From their current perspective, women remembered who they were before the relationship and how they gave up being that person. Cathryn talked about being a woman who, "used to have a fire dancing in her eyes," and, after living with the abuse a friend noticed there "wasn't even a spark."

The women endured personal costs because of the abuse in their lives. All of the women internalized the problems in their intimate relationships, attempted to make things better, and ultimately found they could not. This failure resulted in women experiencing low self-esteem, self-doubt and, for some, suicidal thoughts. Remembering by recounting their narratives seemed

to reinforce their commitment to leave. For the women in this study, the personal costs of being in abusive relationships profoundly shaped their experience of motherhood.

The Ideals of Motherhood

Motherhood—being able to call oneself a mother—represented a social identity and could raise esteem for women in this study. Being a mother was for these women an invitation to hold ideals for the raising of children even when they had not held those same ideals for the treatment of themselves within their relationships. Even though each of the women in the study felt that the violent nature of her relationship undermined her role as protector and guide, all still anticipated motherhood with some degree of optimism. The women talked about the models of motherhood held up by their parents and by society. Each woman held an ideal of being the “best” mother she could be. When they reflected back on living with an abusive partner, they realized these ideals of motherhood and hopes for their children somehow saved them.

The Anticipation of Motherhood

Women in this study spoke of preparing for their first child. Their reactions ranged from ambivalence to elation and great expectation. They found it particularly difficult to anticipate the event positively when partners did not share in the excitement of the pregnancy or when partners were verbally or physically aggressive in response to the news. Diane was young and had the responsibility of a six-year-old stepdaughter during her first pregnancy; she told me, “he didn’t want another kid.” The anticipation of motherhood turned into another stressor when women felt they were bringing a child into an abusive relationship, especially when the partners

said they did not want children. When asked about whether she had a positive outlook about becoming a mother for the first time, Robin replied, "I never experienced it." Her partner was not excited about having a child and he was physically abusive towards her. This lack of support coupled with the abuse deflated her expectations of motherhood. For all of the women, the partner's participation in preparing for a child was important. Dixon's partner participated in the decision to have children. She talked about the wonder of pregnancy.

I remember being so excited about being pregnant with my daughter. I was just so thrilled and interested in my body changing and couldn't wait, counting off the months 'til I could finally get my bundle of joy.... I was just ecstatic!

Dixon's anticipation of motherhood revealed her excitement about becoming a mother for the first time.

Some of the women in the study hoped the second child would "fix" their relationships such that they would become a "family" again. Cathryn talked about feeling much more anticipation of her second child than she'd had of the first. She said, "I was ready to be a mother then.... I did have the idea that if I had other children, things would get better." Cathryn's relationship did not improve after their second child as she had hoped. However, for Freedom and her partner, bringing a child into the relationship did seem to make life happier. Freedom experienced an escalation of violence during her pregnancy dulling her anticipation of motherhood. Unexpectedly, once her daughter arrived she felt like they were a "family" again and her partner became "the perfect father." For women in this study the anticipation of motherhood was met with mixed feelings because of the abuse in their lives.

Influences on Mothering

As the women told me stories of their parenting experiences, they mentioned particularly supportive people in their lives. For some, friends and family guided these women as they became parents. They also talked of socially held expectations for their parenting. Cathryn talked of her mother as an important figure in her life. She said, "As far as my expectations of motherhood, I think that because I had such a good mother, I knew what it felt like." Dixon, who felt at times supported by her mother, held strong values about mothering that were not congruent with her mother's. She said, "We had such a different philosophy in child rearing.... Now it's better of course, but as babies it was, it was very, very hard." Despite their different philosophies, Dixon welcomed her mother's support. Freedom and Diane also spoke of their mothers as models for their mothering.

For four of the women contact with their mothers was sporadic for various reasons. Some of these women chose a self-imposed isolation because of the violence in their lives. These women were afraid that their families would not understand their abusive situations and that they would judge them. Both Diane and Cathryn worried about telling their mothers about the abuse in their lives. Some of the women also talked of being isolated from their mothers because their partner insisted on it. Robin did not have the support of her mother as her mother did not live in the country. She did have an aunt that she spoke about. Robin said, "My aunt was the only person I had in my family in Canada." Yet, Robin's partner would not allow her to see

her aunt at all. As she approached motherhood, Robin did not find any direct support from the women around her. She mentioned her grandfather's words as support for her parenting. He used to tell her, "you can do anything and everything you want to do."

The women were greatly influenced by the beliefs of others around them in choices they made for their children. Dixon felt her son needed the comfort of breastfeeding longer than her daughter had. Her daughter had weaned herself on her own, but Dixon's son resisted weaning. She felt pressure from others to wean her son abruptly. She said, "I never felt really great about that, although I did know that, sure, it would be very difficult to wean him, and I thought maybe that would be the best. But I always kind of resented having to do that, and it was very painful." Although Dixon did not want to wean her son, she perceived it was "best" by the standards of others. Dixon spoke of how others influences affected her choices as a mother that in hindsight she wished she would have resisted these influences. In response to societal pressures, Freedom read parenting books and "followed them to a T." Robin also talked about how society influenced her choices about mothering. She was pregnant and wanted out of her marriage and said, "I was real worried about what society had to say if I left him. I was carrying his baby. I wasn't going to abort the baby, so it really made sense to stay at the time." Robin was worried about society's perception of single mothers. Women's perceptions of social standards regarding motherhood at times limited the kinds of support they could ask for and at times affected their ability to function as adequate parents.

The Best Mother

Women who are mothers hold for themselves an elusive goal: to be the best mother they can be. Women in this study spoke of their attempts to be good mothers. Dixon talked about how you do the best that you can with what you know at the time about being a good mother. However, each woman set a standard for herself as a mother and attempted to meet this standard to the best of her ability within the violent context of her life. Being the best mother sometimes saved these women from the abusive judgements of their partners; it gave them a refuge from the abuse—a place they could feel good about themselves. Being the best mother somehow made them acutely aware how important their mothering was to their children.

The women in this study immersed themselves in the activity of being the best mother they could be inside and outside of the home, in efforts to appear what they thought normal. Like others around them, they became involved in figure skating, Brownies, basketball, noon hour supervision, and classroom volunteering, and so on. For some, attempting to be so called 'normal' helped diminish the personal terror they experienced inside their homes and made their lives tolerable. Dixon realized the ways in which she tried to be a good mother but she questioned what "normal is anyway." For Dixon, being busy took on significance for her children and deflected the perceived judgmental gaze of society. She participated in many activities with her children and was perceived by others to be a good mother. She said, "I felt if I made myself busy and looked more like the helper instead of the helpee, ... that was another surviving, survival mechanism."

For all of the women being the best mother resulted in self-sacrifice. Looking back on her experience of motherhood, Dixon said,

It's been the biggest challenge of my life, it's exhausting, but it's just the best thing I've ever done.... Oh I, I was just so concerned for them, well I didn't even think about myself, I was just thinking about making it as positive an experience as possible.... But I didn't have a life, I still don't, but I just knew that that was what I wanted for the children.

Freedom talked about being "afraid to leave [her] house" when her partner was being unpredictable. Yet, Freedom took her daughter to a birthday party despite her fear of her partner because she did not want to disappoint her daughter. Cathryn attempted to be the best mother to her children in order to offer the nurturing she desperately needed and never got from her abusive partner. She said,

I think it was my salvation to be a mother, and I had such good children.... They were my happiness; they were what gave my life a reason. You know, because they love you unconditionally. They don't care if you have bad breath, and they're not going to tell you to go brush your teeth; they're not tell you that you look scraggy or that you're stupid. Children don't do that. You know, they're just so accepting and loving. They were my salvation, I know they were. I know they were. They're what kept me going.

All of the women in this study had some concerns that they might not meet all of their children's needs. Their standards for being a good mother were set high, possibly to counter the effects of the abuse, but somehow women did find times when they felt they had done a wonderful job as a mother. Motherhood represented a rescue from the periodic terror in these women's lives, and in retrospect the women felt that they would not have made it through the challenges and the pressures of living in violence if it hadn't been for their children. In fact,

some of these women felt that they “would not be alive” if it wasn’t for their children. The difficulties that the women attached to the role were mitigated by the happiness that having children brought them. Thus despite the abuse, and sometimes in spite of it, women continued to attempt to be the best mother they could be for their children and developed strong mother-child relationships.

The women’s experiences of abuse influenced their experiences of motherhood. It added an overwhelming layer of complexity to their role as a parent. Their ideals and influences of motherhood gave them something to measure themselves against, forcing them to judge themselves and offering them an image of how to be the best mother they could be.

The Implications of Violence upon Motherhood

Women in this study told of many worries in their day to day lives, not the least of which was the effect of the violence on themselves and their children. Concern for the children as they witnessed and/or experienced the abuse overshadowed their concerns for themselves in their stories. A few women told stories of their partner’s direct assaults on their children. More frequently, mothers felt controlled by their partners with respect to their parenting. Women talked about managing relationships with their children—children, who were invariably affected by the abuse in their families. And, reflecting on their experiences, the women also found their children a source of insight into their lives.

Caring for Children within the Abuse

All the women in this study related with difficulty stories about caring for their children who witnessed and or experienced abuse. Robin talked about an incident when her son witnessed the violence, she said, "I look at the times he has beat me up, and I still remember [my son] being three years old and seeing me getting [beat up]. He used to get really afraid, really scared." These women remembered their deep concern for the children even while being abused. Foremost, they worried that as mothers they could not protect their children. For example, Cathryn said, "They didn't get protected against it, and it made me feel very sad. I could see the hurt in their eyes and how sad they looked." Freedom also talked about how her daughter witnessed the violence of her partner. She remembered, "she was just only little but she watched it, and I tried to protect her from it. I tried to hide her. I told her to go to her room and run and hide. She wouldn't, she wanted to see what daddy was doing." Even when the events being recounted had happened years earlier, it was clear that these stories were incredibly painful for the women to recall.

The women felt powerless to change the situation they were in, but as often as they could, they made efforts to minimize the violence their children witnessed. Diane told stories of her children witnessing incidents she felt powerless to change; these were times she was fighting for her life. Having figured out her partner's patterns, she said,

I left two [of the] kids at my parents because I knew he was mad, and I just didn't want them seeing it.... He screamed and yelled, hitting me, punched me, and I'm just

trying, [to] yell at the kids, it's okay. You know you go to bed, go to bed. Meanwhile, they're hearing it all.

When she could anticipate the violence, Diane would care for her children by leaving the oldest two at her parents, and minimize the effects of the abuse on the younger ones. She talked of how she would comfort and care for her children's after particularly horrible incidents in which she was beaten and her children witnessed the violence.

Children would often become the recipients of abuse while living with their fathers.

Diane spoke of another incident in which the children were the direct recipients of the abuse:

He's bashing me around. And they're crying and [my son was] trying to hit him. He threw [the youngest one] against the wall. I should say, there was a lot of physical abuse mainly to three of them, more mental or verbal to the oldest, who has low self-esteem now.

Diane also told stories of being unable to stop her partner from beating the children. When she tried to intervene, they would "get it worse" and she would also be beaten later. Unlike Diane, Robin cannot remember any profound physical abuse her partner directed at her children, although she recalled the mental abuse. She said,

I hope my kids understand because they have seen him get drunk, beat me up, you know, he has not done that much, like ... he probably has pushed the kids when he was drunk or something but he has never beaten up the kids. But there's lots of mental abuse [toward] them and, I don't know sometimes I think they forget that it was there.

After all the family had been through, Robin worried the children would not remember the abuse and would only remember the leaving that took them away from their father. That children were even involved in the abuse was difficult for women to reconcile. Their stories revealed the self-

doubt and blame they still associate with the incidents. Although their partners were responsible for the violence, women took responsibility for their children's pain; to the best of their ability, they protected their children even when being abused themselves.

Mothering Controlled by Partner

Even at best, parenting may be seen as a constant negotiation between partners in families amid differing philosophies on how to raise children. For the women in this study, negotiation was not part of the practice of parenting with their partners; rather, the partner's controlling behaviour was pervasive and left no room for negotiation. In each case, the woman gave in to the way her partner wanted things to be—resulting once again in feelings of guilt and shame for the woman. Robin talked about her experience of living with a man who placed restrictions on the behaviours of his family members. Robin had been the breadwinner in her family. Her partner stayed at home and yet was an unpredictable and unreliable father. His control of the children was evident in her stories of motherhood. She said he had “always been abusive”:

I have my regrets at times because my kids were not in many kinds of games. They never had the opportunity.... [My child] is in basketball now, and he's able to do that. He still doesn't have very much of my support, but he's able to do what he wants to do. And I think that's more important to me, because not just that [my partner] had limitations for me but he had limitations for my kids.”

Even the freedom she feels today—to allow her children to be involved in sports—is coloured by her experience of the limitations once imposed on her.

The limitations and restrictions that partners had on the woman and the children were of great concern to the women in this study. Freedom “loved being a mother”. However, she said, “I could only mother her the way he said, and it was a lot of work going to school and having to have cloth diapers because, you know, Pampers wouldn’t do, and I just wasn’t working hard enough to keep these cloth diapers clean.” For her, “it was hard to be a mother” because she felt she also had to live up to “that perfect standard” and make sure “everything was immaculately clean.” Even though she “read every book about parenting”, she had to admit, “I’m too artistic to be a perfectionist.” Her perception of her partner’s expectations—that she be a perfectionist—was that they were controlling her life. She reflected on how her inability to make choices regarding her child resulted in her feeling powerless and vulnerable as a mother.

He wouldn’t allow us to pay for a babysitter, and he said no one was going to be near his daughter.... I felt so powerless to do anything. I felt as if I had to listen to him and that I couldn’t do what I should do with my daughter because I had to listen to what he said.... I gave away the power of my life. I see that period as a really bad period, and I think a lot of it was my vulnerability around my daughter and being a mother.

Being restricted in their mothering by their partners was devastating for all the women in the study. Such an incongruent practice as parenting according to another’s style took its toll on the women. Their stories revealed the depression and loss of self-esteem that resulted from living with an abusive partner.

While for Cathryn abuse affected her self-esteem and encouraged negative feelings about herself, it somehow made her want to be a better mother. Being a better mother was linked to deflecting her partner’s abuse:

I think [the abuse] made me want to be a better mother. I think I became very hard on myself and guilty if I didn't have my children, all of them, always bathed and looking [right]. And I think it was because I was so afraid of him; he'd literally come home and run his finger on the furniture to see if it's dusty.... I think a piece of it was him.... I wanted everything to be perfect so that he wouldn't tell me how stupid I was.

Feelings of inadequacy were commonplace for the women in this study. Living by another's control was, for a time, a way of life, and not until they were away from the violence did they understand the magnitude of the problem. Living by her own sense of values, Cathryn admitted she would have been "more lenient and happy go lucky" with her children. Both Diane and Dixon talked about how when they left the relationship their children "loved the transition house"; just being able to do whatever they wanted with their children was like "living in a luxury hotel." The women could make decisions about the simplest thing in relation to their children and feel good about it. The contrast that the new found freedom allowed, once out of the relationship, made their lives with their partners seem quite limiting.

Managing Relationships with Children

Living with an abusive partner meant for the women in this study managing their children in the context of an unpredictable family life. When children's plans were spoiled and family outings suddenly cancelled, children exhibited behaviours that presented an added challenge to their mothers. Children would be disappointed and seek comfort; they would sometimes be resistant to their mother's interactions; and at times they would act out, sometimes with hurtful comments or actions.

Women spoke of having to pick up the pieces when children were disappointed. After fathers had been abusive or when family plans suddenly changed because of his unpredictability, the women would take whatever responsibility for comforting their children. Diane would sneak into her children's room, she said, "they'd be waiting for me" to comfort them after their father's rages. Women talked about "smothering" their children in response to the abuse and being very protective of the children. Dixon's partner accused her of "babying the children" when she would attempt to comfort them after their father was verbally abusive toward the children. She talked about how she would make excuses for her partner's behaviour. She explained to her children that "he is tired or he doesn't mean it." Robin would be the one to explain to her children why their friends were never allowed at their home after school. Some children were too young to understand the kinds of restrictions placed on them. All of the women in this study talked about responding to their partner's strict control of family life by attempting to "make it better" for their children.

Sometimes the women in this study felt their children were used to being threatened; they said their children wouldn't listen to them at times. Often they thought themselves not threatening enough: their children would not respond to Mom's requests, but they had always responded to Dad's. Diane spoke of resorting to "smacking them for the tiniest little thing." She spoke of the difference between her own "smack" and the "beating" that their father would give. Nevertheless, she recognized her behaviour as "just like him" and stopped as soon as she noticed herself. Managing relationships while living in the abusive relationship also meant being hyper

vigilant and monitoring how the abuse was affecting their children. At times, women recognized negative behaviour in their children and felt unable to manage their relationships with their children. Robin spoke of her children's "tantrums" and her children being "kicked out of summer school." She talked about feeling at a loss for strategies to parent her children. She said, "I had no idea how to cope with this."

For three of the women though, particular incidents became marked in their minds as a point where they could no longer manage the effects of their abusive relationship on the children. Diane recalled her children were the "reason she stayed", and so when she suddenly realized that "they were unhappy" she had another reason than just herself for leaving the relationship. One day Freedom's partner was violent and she responded by grabbing him by the neck. Freedom heard her daughter say words that reminded her of her own reaction to being abused as a child. Her daughter screamed, "'Mummy, mummy just do whatever he says and he'll listen. It's all I have to do'." Freedom realized, "I'm teaching my daughter just what I learned as a little girl...it was 'just shut up and take it'. So I picked up [my daughter] and left, and I told him I wanted a divorce." This poignant reminder of her own childhood of abuse was the impetus for her to leave. She could see no other options for managing her daughter's reaction to the abuse than to leave.

When the women recalled parenting within an abusive relationship, they recognized the severe limitation they had been working within. Women attempted to provide a semblance of normalcy for their children by offering their children support as their mother. Managing

relationships with their children within abusive situations was difficult, and all of the women did not feel they had adequately met their children's needs.

Strategies to Manage Violence in the Relationship

All of the women in this study learned strategies for surviving the day to day violence and abuse. They responded to their partner's control over their lives and the lives of their children by working with the choices they could make; women tried their best to protect their children, protect themselves, and use active forms of resistance. The women were able to find solace in parenting their children in their own way as response to the control in their lives. Years of careful planning lead to eventual escape from violence, however, sometimes leaving was an unplanned but immediate response to a violent event. For all, leaving resulted from a culmination of events through which the women continually adjusted their own frame of reference and which finally gave them new perspective.

Responding to Control

Since the abusive relationships described by the women in this study manifested themselves in many ways, the women responded to the control exerted by their partners using a wide range of strategies. While they each made choices around how to respond to their partner's control, their partner's unpredictability sometimes limited women's opportunity to react in ways that served them best. Strategies to respond to the control were sometimes deflective or reactive—presenting a perfect image and attempting to ensure children's safety; and at other times, active and deliberate—resisting the control and figuring out their partners triggers.

Toward finding a way to minimize the violence in their lives, Dixon and Cathryn told of coping with the control of their partner. Dixon told a story of being allowed out with a friend and expecting the price to be his sexual violence when she got home. She said, "So it would just be the odd incident.... We'd look like the perfect family, like we had it all." Dixon attempted to minimize her partner's abuse through keeping up an image of the perfect family; she said she did this as a form of survival. In a later interview Dixon said she learned to maintain this image of the perfect family because when she did attempt to talk about her problems with others her partner would find out and she "would get into trouble." She soon learned that "building the walls" of perfection around her meant less abuse from her partner. For Cathryn, keeping a perfect family meant creating a picture of perfectness always in her mind; to her survival was about deflecting her partner's abuse with this image. As the perfect wife and mother she might minimize her partner's complaints. She said, "I think the exterior part in all of that perfectness was so that he wouldn't call me ugly names and tell me how awful I was and how inadequate I was." All the women talked about how others perceived that they had the dream life. This outward image was important almost as a way of legitimizing their staying. Diane talked about the "guilt" she felt when people said she must be a good mother, raising four children. The image she projected was one of a happy parent. However, Diane was very unhappy in her marriage and felt inadequate as a mother. On one occasion, when her child was thrown against a bedpost and needed stitches her child told her that he loved her when she took him to the hospital. Her thoughts were, "How could you love me when I can't protect you from this?"

Diane did not tell the hospital staff how her son's injury occurred. Maintaining the dream life, for outward appearance, was important not only because it helped to deflect their partner's abuse but it also saved them from the judgement of others.

Over the years women started to become adept at recognizing behaviours in their partners that either triggered the abuse or patterns of their own behaviour that could minimize the abuse. Dixon said, "In later years I would realize that was the trigger.... If he started bringing up his childhood, I knew, oops, I'm in for it tonight. I'm going to get, something's gonna happen 'cause that's how it starts." Dixon talked about asking her counselor for advice on "how to manage [the abuse]" when leaving was not a viable option for her. She hoped that she "would be smarter" than her partner and be able to minimize the abuse in her life. Women came to know what patterns of dialogue or occasion would trigger their partner's violence, and they attempted to avoid them. These triggers would revolve around having the proper kind of dinner cooked, the children going to bed on time, or avoiding any response to the verbal or physical assaults by her partner. When maneuvering around these triggers successfully, women could feel in control of the abuse. The flip side was that if abuse was triggered, women felt at fault and out of control. Diane talked about guilt and feeling it was her fault when her partner would say things like, "if you were a better wife," as rationale for his abuse. Freedom figured out some of her partner's triggers and her response was to avoid him as much as she could. She said she started going to work as soon as he came home, handing over her daughter to him, and told of hiding from her partner in the house. Women's various ways of coping with the lack of control in their lives

made the violence manageable. In many ways, responding to the control was an active form of resisting the abuse. Women had to be adept at maintaining a positive family image while also figuring out how to best manage their lives within their families in ways that resulted in protection of themselves and their children.

Protecting the Children

The women protected their children by overt control strategies to keep children from both witnessing the abuse they themselves received and from being the recipients of their father's abuse whenever possible. The women talked about getting their children interested in a video when Dad was particularly volatile. Two women talked about how they would stand between the abuser and their children. Cathryn used the metaphor of being a guard between her children and her partner, saying,

I've always protected them...you know how when somebody, wants to guard somebody and they put their hands out. And my children are behind me, and that's what I keep feeling like, I've got to protect them from being hurt.

Diane and Freedom could not always guard their children from witnessing or directly experiencing the abuse, but they controlled what they could. Freedom told of how her daughter was kicked when she was a baby and how she attempted to minimize her daughter's fears. She said, "I was nursing her 'cause she was so upset, and I was trying to calm her down and make sure she was okay." Dixon said that when her partner was verbally abusing her son, she would protect him from further abuse by demanding that her partner stop.

I wouldn't let him go there. I wouldn't let him take that away from me, I mean that's where he knew I definitely had boundaries around my parenting. I knew I was doing the right thing so, while I realize I'll never be a perfect parent, because what's that? I'm comfortable in my parenting style.

Regardless of how women attempted to protect their children, all talked about strategies for minimizing what the children saw or experienced. Only for Diane, this meant not intervening when her children were recipients of abuse. She talked about how if she intervened, "it would make him worse more aggravated." Diane went on to say that if she attempted to intervene her partner would attack her and "make it worse" for her children.

Silent Active Resistance

The women used various forms of resistance when they were living in the situations involving violence. Sometimes the overt control strategies were not enough to get them through their days. They talked about using denial with statements like, "It's like it never really happened." As well they talked of dissociating their minds from their bodies in order to take the physical without further emotional harm. Dixon talked of how she was able to get through living with her partner when she felt she had no way out of it. She spoke of the sexual abuse in her life and of how incidents every couple of months would last only fifteen minutes. She eventually coped with her situation by smoking marijuana. The drugs would allow her to completely dissociate herself from what was going on. She said, "I just learned to disassociate my body, my mind from my body, and think, 'Well okay, I've got to do this, I've got to get through this'."

Eventually her partner recognized she was the one in control; he attempted to gain this back by verbally degrading her.

There was some satisfaction for the women in taking back some of the power in the relationship. In another form of active silent resistance, Freedom told of seeing a can of shrimp in the grocery store and putting it in her buggy. Because her partner was "highly allergic to shrimp," this gesture—although never carried out—made her feel powerful simply because she knew of one of his vulnerabilities. During beatings Diane sometimes fantasized about suicide. She said, "I remember wanting, thinking, 'There's a way out of this.'" Her thoughts of escape were a form of silent resistance. When asked about her suicidal thoughts Cathryn said,

It's an empowering thing, knowing that you have a way out.... It's a door, even though it's not a healthy door to go through; it still gives you a feeling of, 'I have a choice, this pain could end' if I [chose suicide].

The idea that she had a choice about enduring the pain of the abuse helped Cathryn to manage her feelings while she remained in her relationship.

Glimpses of "mothering my way"

Many of the women talked about gaining a sense of control within their situations by mothering their children the way they wanted. For the most part, this would occur when their partners were not around. Dixon reflected on how being a good mother helped her to cope with her abuse. She said,

I think it's a coping mechanism being a good mother.... You can shift away from the problems that you have by being the best that you can as a mother to shield them from [the abuse]. I guess it made me feel really good about myself and that's where my

strength is.... If I can be such a good mom ... that really helped me get through [the abuse].

Mothering her own way allowed Dixon distance from the abuse. Robin talked about parenting her children while she was still with her partner. She said, "You know, when he's not there, just to be able to play around with them.... I'm a kid when I'm with my kids." Dixon too talked about how she countered the abuse by spending time with her children. Time was spent with them in classrooms and doing extracurricular activities: "I just did my best, but I always gave them lots of time.... I've been very involved with the children." Cathryn told of the emotional abuse that affected her mothering but said, "as far as my children went, I used to love to play with them, and do things with them and I had that part that was for me because he was out of town." Freedom related that her partner would "blacken my breasts because he said I enjoyed breastfeeding"; to spite her partner, Freedom breastfed her daughter "until she was three." Freedom also told of an unexpected opportunity for teaching her daughter about life when doing work around the house:

We'd spent the whole afternoon watching ants. We were cleaning out the backyard. We just spent the afternoon watching these ants move their home to a new stump, and it was quite fascinating. It was an opportunity to talk about life and how it happens, still on a two year old level but and literally hours she would watch these guys ... we had so much fun that afternoon.

The lack of attention to the home resulted in Freedom's partner becoming abusive toward her that night. Eventually Freedom learned how to accept doing things like watching ants all day. She said that she came to understand that "that's what mothers are supposed to do" despite her

feelings of guilt that she was not living up to her partner's expectations of being a good wife and mother. Doing things her own way became a worthwhile risk.

Deciding to Leave

When the options for the women in this study were few, choices were complex and involved much contemplation. When the story of why they left was told, it was often difficult to separate from the story of why they stayed. For some, the leaving was undertaken with much thought and planning. Women talked vaguely about a final episode, but their own stories were inconsistent. Of importance was not whether there was one final episode but that there was a final reason, a final frame of mind by which to make a significant change. For some, it was "just knowing" she had to leave; for others, it was seeing a distinct change in her children, something concrete and visible. Undoubtedly, women found support somewhere, and the source of support was varied.

Reasons for Staying/Leaving

The women stayed with the men for various reasons not the least of which was that they loved their partners. The women also talked about their children as a reason to stay as well as a reason to leave the relationship. Robin's explanation for staying was simply to say, "kids, I think that's the reason it took me thirteen years to leave him." Diane also talked about staying for her children and deciding to leave when her children were visibly unhappy. Similarly, Dixon told a

story of verbally abusing her daughter and how her daughter's pain affected her choice to leave, saying,

I remember one time I said to [my daughter] I said, 'Oh. You're, why are you so stupid?' As soon as I said it, she was so upset, and that's when I knew, oh, I've got to get out of this.... I had never talked to her that way.... I was at my breaking point, so I carried it for as long as I could, thinking well I'm doing the right thing.

Her own abuse of her daughter and her daughter's reaction was concrete evidence that change was necessary.

Cathryn's reason for staying was that her husband wasn't around all the time, thus making the relationship bearable. She said, "His job took him away out of town a lot, and I sometimes think that's why I did stay so long 'cause I didn't have continual contact with him." When it did come time to leave, Kathryn recalled it was her children who helped her with the decision. Her experience of that final decision is less concrete. She said, "I think it had to do with thinking to myself that I'm dead... because I did have suicidal thoughts a lot. And it had everything to do with them having a mother and them not having a mother." Women seemed to have distinct reasons for staying and for leaving. For Dixon, leaving was merely physical. She said, "I'd already left the relationship in my mind five years ago." She added, "I just didn't know how to leave before; I just didn't know how to leave." Her image of herself as helpless started to erode over time, and she was eventually able to make a careful plan to leave.

Making a Plan

At some point the women understood they needed to plan how they would leave their abusive partners. For some, all the planning in the world would not help if their partner became extremely violent and a quick exit with the children became necessary. Thus avoiding extreme violence was a part of the plan. Preparing these plans and keeping them in mind seemed as important as carrying them out. Making a plan for some of the women happened slowly and over time. Robin's plan was connected to learning how to drive, doing volunteer work, and "getting [a] foot in the door" to the community. Although Diane's partner used to keep her home by "dismantling the car," Diane spoke proudly of figuring out his tactics and "learning how to put things [in the car] together." Even so, after a particularly horrific two days of abuse, Diane had to leave without being prepared for the exit.

Dixon's plans began when she saw a counselor after her partner had an affair and learned she would need to have a plan. Dixon recalled her counselor saying, "'You have to save up a little bit of money.'" She added,

I just kept it to myself, and I got another credit card in my name. I got my own little bank account started, but he questioned everything, so I had to be very, very careful. I had to start making plans: 'How am I going to get any money to talk to a lawyer...'

Dixon found out about transition houses and started to make plans for leaving. She said, "I tried to check out this transition house before I took my children there." This was difficult to accomplish in secret.

Even carefully made plans sometimes did not work out because of the unpredictability of the situation. Freedom, who left and who was forced back home because she was worried about the effects of such inconsistency on her daughter, entered into an agreement with her partner to share the family home. While she awaited approval for buying her new home, they lived in separate parts of the house. She spoke of keeping herself safe while sharing a home with an abusive and unpredictable man.

I made an agreement with him that I would waive my spousal support in lieu of him co-signing the mortgage on my new house so that I could have a place for [my daughter] because we'd slept in the car a few nights. I had my bags packed in the trunk of my car; I took my keys off of his key ring when he [was] sleeping one night so that that he couldn't get at my car.

Because her contingency plan gave her a sense of security, Freedom was able to negotiate an arrangement that protected her daughter's needs as well as her own safety.

Sources of Support

All of the women talked about some person in their lives who was supportive toward them during the leaving phase of the relationship. Some of these support people will likely never know the effect their words or actions had on the women. For two of the women, nurses were the most supportive people. Neither of these nurses could possibly know, when they said goodbye to the women, whether their assistance would have helped the women to live violence-free.

Support came from family and friends when the women most needed it or were ready for it. For example, Cathryn told of three people in her life whose support had changed the course of

her life. The story of her leaving started with the comments a good friend had made to her about how Cathryn had changed and she recognized "I have to do something. I do, because I can't, I'm dying, and I really did feel like I was dying and finally somebody recognized that...it didn't happen overnight." Cathryn talked about a barrier that was broken because her secret of living with abuse was out. After she took a cousin into her confidence, the cousin told Cathryn she could stay with her if she decided to leave the relationship. Finally, her daughter's kindergarten teacher, Sarah, noticed that Cathryn herself was markedly withdrawn when she was with her partner. Sarah wondered if there were problems in Cathryn's relationship. When Cathryn told her about the abuse, Sarah offered Cathryn money, and this gesture seemed to be the final support necessary for her to leave. Cathryn remembers,

I had a place to stay, a support system, and somebody that gave me some money. And that's when I left, with my seven boxes and my children and I had no money—within a week—because I think she only gave me four hundred dollars, which was a lot of money at that time, but it didn't go very far.

In her story of getting safe, Dixon talked of a rape crisis counselor who got her into a transition house; of a police officer who put her through a "necessary" and grueling interview to get the best evidence for charging her partner with sexual assault; of helpful staff at a transition house; and of a lawyer who helped to secure child support. When leaving the relationship seemed the only viable option toward managing the violence in their lives, the women in this study found their decision to leave was reinforced by the people who supported them. With courage, with

support, and with a need to protect their children, these women exercised whatever agency was left to them.

Carrying on in the Aftermath

The struggle to be an effective single mother in the aftermath of leaving a relationship was made more complex by the experience of that relationship having been a violent one. The practice of carrying on in the aftermath of a violent relationship was well summarized by Cathryn. She stated, "I think most days I feel free...I don't think you're ever really free, because it's something that scars your heart. But you heal." For her, carrying on occurred within a context of personal strength and guarded optimism. For all of the women in this study, violence was still central to their stories even in the aftermath. Amid constant reminders of the connection to violence, women were also able to rejoice in their freedom and to be the parent they always wanted to be. Their freedom, however, was not taken for granted as women deal with constant reminders of the past, with motherhood itself as a link to the abuse, and with celebrating freedom with caution.

Constant Reminders

Although the women in this study were free from the immediate violence in their lives, they were faced with constant reminders of the relationship that they left behind. Lack of both finances and time was evident in the stories of women trying to make their lives work. Living apart from an unpredictable partner involved some level of fear of partners showing up, of them

becoming violent and/or of gaining access to the children. The fear these women expressed took on many faces.

Finances and Time

In starting over again, all the women in the study had to secure finances and manage time with their children. One woman said of the new challenge, "I went from being a mother that could be available to her children to a mother that now had to work. And that was very, very hard". One question was common among women in the first days of starting over: How will we live? Their primary focus was first on finances and time spent with their children. Robin, a woman who was working, felt she did not have as much time for her children as she would like. Speaking of her ability to parent her children, she said, "I don't have to deal with him all the time so my agenda is a lot more available for the kids, and I come home and I don't have to worry about him." Women also told stories of living in their cars and of relying on friends when they were first out of the relationship. Cathryn talked about those first years after leaving her relationship.

I was really poor then, but then I had a purpose and I knew that I could get out of my poverty. Before that it was awful because you had to do all sorts of things to stay alive. Like pick pop bottles off the street, take hand-me-downs from people, which wasn't too bad...

Guiding her children through the poverty, she said, "I used to make games about going and looking for the pop bottles." Using the services of the food bank, she said, "I didn't really tell them we were going to the food bank." Having others feel sorry for her financially was "very

degrading” and made her “self-esteem go.” However dire their situation, strength was found even in the memory of one’s weakness in the abusive situation. Cathryn added, “His abusive words of how you’ll never make it, you’ll never make anything out of yourself, you’re too dumb—that kept me going too. Because then I had something to prove to him.” Constantly having to find balance between adequate finances and time with children, women found their own parenting and their own values continued to be affected by the memories of violence. Cathryn’s words were clear: “I felt strong and weak at the same time.” Like other women in this study, the constant reminder of her partner’s abusive words served as a catalyst for determination.

Faces of Fear

Living apart from a violent partner did not erase the anticipation of violence that was a source of fear in the women’s lives. At best, the women lived in relative confidence that they were in control of their safety. However, there was a constant fear that the women came to expect in their lives. This fear encompassed worries of personal safety and safety of their children. Freedom talked about her fears when her partner was irrational during her contact with him. She said,

I started to think he was going to kill me. I really did. And I was starting to get really paranoid. I’d jump at any little sound, then and think there was somebody there. I was very jumpy and then I think that though I was more scared than I’d ever been in my life, [my daughter] started to be freer.”

Robin also talked about her fears, and, like other women, her sense was that this fear will always be with her: "When he's drunk he's capable of anything. I worry about him coming in the house and trying to hurt us again. I don't think it's going to ever be over." Although women were at various stages in the process of leaving their partners, this fear was carried with them in various forms. Even after 15 years of separation Cathryn talked not of her fear of violence but of her fear of poverty. Her years of having nothing were with her every day: "I'm worried. What if I don't have money any more, and what will I do? Because it was just the awfulest feeling in the world to feel destitute." Fear too was then a constant reminder for these mothers of the difference between the struggle of being a single parent and the struggle of connection with a violent partner.

Issues of Access

Handing over children to an unpredictable partner presents particular challenges for the women. The women wanted their children to be connected to their fathers; yet, some also feared for their children's safety at the same time. Handing over children to men who did not participate in the raising of the children seemed to the women in the study both difficult to reconcile and unfair to themselves and their children. Robin's partner would get drunk and pass out on many occasions when he was caring for the children; yet, she said, "I still have to share custody ... if I could give anything, everything I have, and walk away and never see him in my life, I would start over again. Unfortunately, I can't do that." Dixon talked about her struggle

with her ex-partner over access to the children. Despite his lack of involvement with the children when they were together, she said, "he does love the children."

He never wanted to look after them. It was like I did all the day to day care, all the hands on care, and now he, he's starting asking for all this access time, and I thought you didn't want them before, they were always a pain before and now why is he doing this, you know? It's just to get back at me I know.

While four of the partners were not particularly interested in caring for the children while the family was together, all partners insisted on the sharing of custody. Once free, the mothers saw handing over the children as a continuing reminder and often as a continuation of the abuse.

Motherhood as Link

Children became the link to the person from whom the women had fought so hard to break free from. This link to the abuse, as children visited their fathers, was not a connection any of the women anticipated before leaving. They had brought their children away from abuse only to place them in the middle of their parent's struggles. Recognizing that she will be connected for many years, Robin said that because, "he still has access to the kids, he's still able to manipulate me through the kids, he's always going to be in my life, 'til at least the kids are grown up and they're not living with me anymore." Although women attempted to minimize for themselves the problems associated with this link to the partner, the new struggle was a reality they had to face. Cathryn's life with her adult children echoed Robin's concerns about her own continuing link to abuse. She recognized her husband was still abusing her in that he was attempting to belittle her children:

You know, it probably is worse now.... Now, they are starting to get some of the stupid comments that I used to get. It hurts me when I see it. He can't hurt me anymore directly. But that's right, he is still hurting me. And I didn't think about that before but he is. He's still hurting me because he is hurting them.... You think you're rid of them and they're still haunting you.

For Cathryn, the relationship with her partner was unchanged by her leaving in that she still feared him in the same ways.

When mothers are in hiding but must offer their partners visitation with the children, children are sometimes placed in awkward situations. Fathers may ask personal questions about their lives. Dixon must face this added challenge to her parenting. She offered the point, "I've even taught my children we have to keep some secrets which are unfortunate, like my ex husband can't know where we live, and he can't know where they go to school." Since some fathers ask children for details surrounding the mother's dwelling or the child's school or teachers, the mothers tried to manage their children's worry around answering these questions as well as their own feeling of helplessness and anger. Robin spoke of this challenge.

I kind of feel odd because he's put in this situation, he's thirteen, he's old enough to understand what his mom wants. You know, when he goes to visit his dad and he asks, "Oh, by the way, is she dating anybody? Who's coming to the house? Who's visiting you guys? Who you are socializing with?" You know, they're kids, they'll say things or they'll like, you know, just, something will come out and then they'll be put in the position that they have to discuss it more.

While the mothers found no way to fully prepare their children for visits with their fathers, all felt they had to be aware of the links to the abusive partner and protective of their children.

Even when visitation presented fewer problems for the children, it often presented problems for the women who were forced into contact with their partners. This contact, the moment of handing over the children, was another venue for continued abuse, and ways of mothering became, for the father, the issue most vulnerable and most often targeted. Partners would use these opportunities to complain about a range of issues, from clothing and cleanliness to schooling and visitation. After Freedom had dropped her restraining order and allowed her partner visitation, he became verbally abusive whenever she handed over her daughter to him. Her partner would complain about her daughter's lunches and the clothing she was wearing. Freedom told me that one day her little girl "saw her favorite outfit" newly washed and "she wanted to wear it." She explained to me that "little kids get this thing in their head, they want to wear the same outfit over and over." Her partner became abusive toward Freedom, saying his daughter was now wearing the same outfit two days in a row. This example is only one of many incidents in which her partner attacked her, and the stories the other women told revealed similar abuse during the hand over of children most often directed at issues of mothering. Freedom's story of handing over children in a parking lot serves as an illustration of the kind of constant abuse many women must take from their partners regarding their abilities as a parent. For women in this study, contact with their partner during the hand over of the children resulted in an opportunity for a pattern of emotional and verbal abuse. While women were aware of the link that children represented to their history of abuse they were also aware of how the children made it possible for the abuse to carry on into their lives after leaving the relationship.

Celebrating Freedom

The women's strength to survive beyond abuse was evident in their stories. The challenges they faced while parenting their children and carrying on after a violent relationship were many and varied. When these women could celebrate the freedom they worked so hard to achieve, they were celebrating their own strength and determination. Freedom chose her pseudonym for this study because she felt free and she rejoiced in her new life. She talked, as others did in this study, of gaining back something of the woman that she had remembered. The women in this study talked of how being free meant they could establish their own sense of family together with their children. This same freedom allowed the women to make choices about their parenting which were congruent with their own values.

Sense of Self

The women in this study talked about finding the person that they lost while enduring violence. For some, the change was gradual, almost imperceptible. For others, the regaining of self was sudden and evident when friends or family noticed the change in them. Children played a large role in these women's sense of themselves as mothers. The celebration was one of finding strength and agency where neither was available for so long. The story started with losing the self somewhere in the violence. Freedom described how the violent relationship resulted for her in a "slow giving away of self" and a "slow giving away of her power." In retrospect, all the women told of "believing in myself," as what got them through the abuse. Dixon told of how she got her first cheque and how taking it to the bank meant she could live in

second stage housing. She said, "I felt really good about myself, so it's been a long struggle to put a house back together, to put our lives back together." It was evident that hers was a struggle that helped her gain back the self that she knew to be strong and capable. Of her own strength, Robin said, "nobody can kill my determination and nobody can kill my spirit." For both Robin and Cathryn, friends were the first to notice the change in them. The "real Robin" shone through for Robin's friend a year after Robin left her partner: "It's you" she exclaimed. Cathryn, like the other women in this study, talked about getting her "spark" back, the old self she used to know.

Children became the mirrors to happiness for women in this study. When the women of this study saw their children happy, they perceived it as a reflection of their success as mothers and their success as a people. Freedom spoke of a telephone conversation with a friend in Jamaica in which her friend noticed her daughter was laughing in the background. Because this was the same friend who once mentioned "her daughter was very serious," Freedom perceived a measure of success. She said, "she [daughter] was four by then." My friend never heard my daughter laugh. I realized then that we were free, we were really free.... I was free." Many women measured their successes by their children's happiness. They celebrated their ability to get themselves free and find the person that they once knew before the onset of violence. Women in this study talked of being ready to rebuild themselves and their lives with their children regardless of the constant reminders of their history of abuse.

Reconstructing Family

Long held traditional notions of family were partly responsible for keeping women in their relationships. Once they left with the children, women needed to work on reconstructing a new, sense of family, something closer to their own set of values perhaps. Yet, they knew this new sense of family would be different from previously held notions. Women had to teach their children that they “are a family, without a man, without a father.” Implicit in their teaching was a comfort that they did not need to have a father to make their “lives complete or to make ... family complete.” Freedom said,

Family can be defined in so many different ways and that [my daughter] and I have a strong family.... I have the capability in mothering [my daughter] to model good behavior with or without a spouse, and I go out of my way to teach my daughter to be strong and independent and to be able to live on her own without the need of being with someone else and yet I also try to model that it's okay to have someone in your life.

Reconstructing notions of family can prove difficult for women who have lived or still live in hiding. Their lives are very secretive and their children must get used to a different, more guarded way of life. Dixon spoke with optimism about how although “it's the kind of family that I always wanted, we are still trying to figure out who we are” as a family. Reconstructing of the notion of family provided these women an opportunity to parent their children and broaden their perspectives about what a strong family can be and what it can offer them as people.

Parenting According to Values

With the immediate violence behind them, the women were able to talk with pride about the choices they had made in their day to day lives with their children. The women continued to

protect their children from the worries of life, and at the same time they began to enact the values that were important to them. For all, the daily freedom to make choices about their parenting was of utmost importance. Indeed, for all of the women, normalizing their children's lives was at the forefront of their minds. There was a measure of confidence in all of the stories that they were doing the right things for their children. Parenting choices for many were made with much thought and consideration. Robin had experienced team building at work and saw the strength that could result when all valued functioning well as a team; she brought the concept home to her children. She said, "It's amazing how you can actually use the skills you're learning in business and apply it to your family life." She also said, "kids don't come with manuals. You just learn as you go. As they grow, you grow up as a parent."

Having choices was felt to be an important part of parenting well and parenting according to the women's values. Women experienced the simple luxuries of deciding how they might spend their days. They could take the kids to Science World when they wanted to or buy them a snack without permission. Robin talked about how her 13-year-old son had his first sleep over.

His first sleepover was last year.... He's never gone to anybody's house for a sleep-over because he was never allowed ... to be able to do something like that, you know, people talk about childhood memories.... I don't want my kids to miss out on that.

These normal activities like having friends visit were important and the women did not take them for granted. Speaking of their of the first night in second stage housing, without furniture, Dixon spoke of the creativity and imagination she used that night.

I made a game out of it, I said, we're camping out tonight, took our pajamas and put them in dryer to warm them up and we had our backpacks, we hiked down the hill to get some food and you know I just made a game of everything. So on the inside I was just a mess, but on the outside I never let on to them that we couldn't handle it.

The women talked about how they would "put on faces" for their children and maintain that everything was okay. Although their circumstances were often challenging, and although they were not always confident that they were doing all the right things for their children, the women in this study now felt able to parent their children in ways that were consistent with their overriding values.

Cautious Optimism

Optimism was a consistent theme within the stories told by women who have been abused. These stories of motherhood in the context of abuse were of overcoming adversity and of hope met with caution. Upon removing themselves and their children from abusive partners, these women anticipated a sense of freedom and actual safety. Since all eventually had to agree to their partners visiting the children, their moment of optimism shifted to a sense of caution: children would have to do their best not to disclose their mother's place of dwelling if she were in hiding, and women knew they would always remain linked by their children to the abuse, both to memories and to continued verbal abuse upon handing the children over. Yet, all came to approach their lives—lives of alternating between relative freedom and visitations with the father—with a cautious optimism. Their concerns differed slightly: Cathryn talked about feeling free on most days; Freedom was looking forward to watching her daughter grow up; Robin

wished she could leave everything behind and start again; Diane was concerned about having to work six days a week; Dixon felt secure in her abilities as a parent that was free to make her own choices. For all of the women in the study, a certain level of optimism as well as a great deal of caution was now possible; the abuse they experienced changed their views of parenting and of the future. All were looking toward living violence-free and parenting their children according to their own values.

Summary

The women in this study offered narratives that constructed images of what it was like to live with children in abusive relationships. These women talked of the challenges they faced during times when they protected their children inadequately as well as times when they were strong as protectors and mothers. Because they believed themselves to be happy with these partners at times, admitting an unsolvable problem existed within the relationship was difficult—all felt at some point in the relationship that working harder at the relationship would solve the problem. In interviews, the women needed to talk about the violence in their lives even though it was no longer part of their daily experience of motherhood.

The context of this violence was confusing at best. Women talked not only of the times of terror but also of the times in which each felt theirs was a happy family. Despite loving their partners, when the abuse was intolerable and when women made decisions to leave, the mothers felt the children's safety was of central concern. The women in this study assumed responsibility for the violence in their lives and endured personal costs associated with the violence. Emotional

costs such as a loss of a sense of self, depression, low self-esteem, and thoughts of suicide were manifestations of living with the battering. Despite the violent context in which they parented, women talked about attempting to attain ideal standards of motherhood in their day to day lives. They were influenced by their own mothers and by other family members as well as by society in general. Women attempted to be the best mother they could be. Being a mother was a source of strength for women in this study, for all talked about their children as their main reason for living through the violence and for breaking free and staying safe.

Carrying an ideal for their mothering, these women measured themselves against the best while also knowing their children had witnessed and/or experienced abuse. These women felt helpless to change these patterns; indeed, their partners controlled parenting with a threat of abuse. These women talked about the guilt and shame of not being able to protect their children from the abuse. They were faced with managing relationships with children who were affected by the abuse. Women were strategic when it came to managing the control of their partners. They would buy into the control their partner's held to minimize the number of occurrences and/or the magnitude of the abuse. They talked about protecting their children from the abuse when possible. When they could, they discovered times to counter their partner's control by mothering their children their own way. Ultimately, women decided to leave the relationship when they saw the effects the abuse had on their children and when support from others materialized.

The aftermath of violence was tinged with constant reminders of their partner's abuse.

Women were often forced into poverty at least for a time. For some, having to work meant not spending enough time with their children. The aftermath also involved a residual but real fear of their ex partner's continuing violence. Women recognized that their children would link them to their abusive partners for life and/or that their partners would continue to abuse them through their children. Women did talk of feeling relatively free, and they held optimism for their futures. For many, regaining a sense of self seemed possible, as did supporting the values they held as mothers. The women remained cautious in their thoughts of the future while reconstructing a sense of family for themselves and their children, for the connection to their ex-partners and to the past violence would always influence their experience of motherhood.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Most of the women who find themselves engulfed in the emotional tumult of motherhood are astonished by the intensity of the bliss that suddenly invades them and the keenness of the anguish they feel when their child is in pain or trouble.

Germaine Greer, the whole woman

The findings of this study broaden our understanding of how violence in intimate relationships shapes the experience of motherhood for women. The women in this study gave of their time and personal experiences because they too worried that others may not fully understand their experiences of motherhood. This concern is understandable. While listening to the stories of the women in this study, I was struck by the various contextual and personal influences in their lives that had arisen because of the abuse.

In my analysis of women's stories of motherhood, I came to understand that the intimate partner abuse they endured influenced the women's experience of motherhood in a variety of ways. Beyond its direct effects, abuse limited the effectiveness of support they could gain for their parenting, and resulted in a form of social isolation. However, despite these effects, the women's stories reveal a consistent pattern of activities and strategies they undertook to be the best mother that they could possibly be to their children.

Women experienced a number of distinct challenges when they came to the point of actually leaving the abusive relationships. Many of these challenges were related to the women's own ideals of family and the family structure that was best for their child. While they remained in the relationship, the women had managed the abuse in creative ways in order to maintain that

connected sense of family. However, when women did leave the poverty and uncertainty they faced because of financial constraints and new responsibilities were complicated by the doubts about their decision to deprive their children of what they had idealized in terms of family life.

The aftermath of leaving a violent relationship was fraught with tensions between experiences of freedom and experiences of control perpetuated by the link women had to their partners through custody and access to the children. Regardless, women found ways to manage visitation and provide their partners with appropriate access. Because of this they felt good about their parenting and were able to reconstruct their families according to their own values.

While the women in this study were at various points in the process of rebuilding their lives after the abuse, they shared a number of experiences. The abuse they endured in their intimate relationships had eroded their self-esteem, and yet motherhood had preserved their sense of self. In their stories, these women revealed strength and resilience, and explained how they had been able to rebuild their self worth, experience growth, and fulfill their responsibilities to their children.

Intimate partner abuse: Shaping the experience of motherhood

The findings of this study suggest that women's experience of motherhood is shaped by the abuse in their intimate relationships. Women found it difficult to discuss their experiences of motherhood without talking about the violence in their lives. Yet, women spoke of the many influences on their mothering and depicted their lives as being full of contradictions. First, women were influenced by their own constructions of appropriate mothering and society's view of mothers. Second, the stigma of abuse limited women's

opportunities for support for their mothering in various ways. Third, women experienced difficulties reconciling the ideals of mothering with the violent context in which they lived.

Altered Perspectives of Motherhood

This research offered women the opportunity to think about, question and construct their lives as mothers by telling a variety of stories that described their experience of motherhood. These stories were set in a social landscape wherein familiar markers for motherhood were repeatedly disrupted. Such disruptions of their notions of motherhood alert us to the complexities in women's lives. In recent years, feminist positions on mothering have oscillated between a view that women's lives should not be constrained by childcare or by childbearing and that the raising of children can be a rich and complex endeavour that many women experience as empowering in itself (Featherstone, 1999; Greer, 1999; Oberman & Josselson, 1996). In the case of violence in intimate relationships, women's range of feelings toward motherhood can become somewhat tangled in the understandable focus on the abuse in their lives (Featherstone) and result in altered perspectives of motherhood. For example, faced with a two-year old having a tantrum, the women in this study would tend to associate the behaviour with the violence in the family—inviting further guilt and responsibility upon themselves—rather than to associate the behaviour with being two years old. Indeed, it was difficult for women within this study to separate their understanding of the effects of the abuse from their understanding of normal challenges of parenthood. While women found many creative ways to manage, minimize, and protect themselves and their

children from the abuse, they questioned their abilities as mothers while negotiating the day to day challenge of survival.

Current theoretical perspectives on motherhood (e.g. maternal role attainment) do not adequately capture the complexities of motherhood in the context of abuse. Although all mothers experience some doubt about their parenting from time to time because of prevailing idealized, unrealistic images of motherhood (Bergum, 1989; Gordon, 1988) and what it means to be a "good" mother (Fay, 1999; Mahoney, 1994), the complexities of mothering in abuse adds a layer to this doubt. Powerful images of motherhood create unrealistic societal and individual expectations. Like other mothers at risk of being stigmatized because they fall short of these 'accepted norms' (Ingram & Hutchison, 1999; Nicholson, Sweeney, & Geller, 1998; Secord, 2000), the women in this study used a variety of strategies to respond to these perceived shortcomings to protect their children and themselves. Despite these strategies, they experienced doubt, guilt, anxiety, and stress. As well, there is evidence that women's self-concept as mothers may be undermined by these unrealistic expectations (Ingram & Hutchinson).

The clouding of the issues of motherhood by the violence described in this study has not been described extensively elsewhere. There is a significant body of literature exploring abused women's concerns about their children (Henderson, 1993; Hilton, 1992; Humphreys, 1995a, 1995b) and the influence such children have on their mother's decisions (Henderson, 1990). These authors have described mother's perceptions of their children's needs and how

mothers make decisions about leaving a violent relationship. The findings of this study extend the findings of this body of literature by describing the complexities inherent in how the abuse influences a mother's evaluation of her options as well as her evaluation of her role as a mother.

Abuse Limits Support

For the women in this study, abuse was a socially stigmatizing phenomenon. Because of this, they all recalled extended periods in which they attempted to avoid disclosure of the abuse to others. For many, this was complicated by a sense that their obligation as a mother was to hold the family together at all costs. However, when the time came that they finally reached out to others for help, they found friends and family less than supportive. Women spoke of how telling a friend sometimes backfired. For example, well-intentioned friends would consult others, the woman's partner would find out, and the woman would have to endure added abuse. Several of the women in this study found that those closest to them sometimes discounted their experiences.

In addition, their status as mothers added to the reluctance these women felt about revealing their experiences of abuse to others. They were afraid about the possibility that their children might be apprehended by protection services. They were worried about judgments that others might make about their mothering. And they also worried their own children might be stigmatized. When their attempts to gain support were unsuccessful, these

women described imposing isolation upon themselves and pouring their energy into being good mothers in attempts to deflect the scrutiny of society upon their mothering.

Research by Lempert (1997) on the negative effects of help-seeking contributes to this discussion in that women in her study found well-intentioned help was often based on "definitional contingency" (p. 302). According to this dynamic, women had to accept others' definitions of the abuse in their lives in order to obtain assistance, thus rendering the assistance less than helpful. The women in this study experienced many of the same problems as the women in the Lempert study. However, women in this study described the added problem with help-seeking that arises because abuse is understood as the ideological opposite to good mothering. The stigma and shame that abuse evokes stopped mothers from seeking help from informal supports. Thus, paradoxically, the support that might have played a role in creating the conditions that could allow them to leave the relationship tended not to be available until they were ready to leave the relationship. This finding suggests that recognition of common patterns and themes in the extended process of leaving an abusive relationship is critically important to the phenomenon of creating helpful support for such mothers.

Ideals of Mothering in the Context of Abuse

The women in this study revealed that, throughout the trauma of abuse, they were guided by the principle of trying to be a good mother. Indeed, in their lives of abuse, the ideals of motherhood were a source of strength. In studies of women living in shelters,

researchers found that women who had experienced abuse were emotionally unavailable for their children and wanted others to care for their children even though the children wanted and needed their mothers (Henderson, 1990; Hilton, 1992). The findings in the present study represented a very different perspective from that of maternal neglect. As was articulated in the stories of these women, the women's primary concern was *always* the well being of the children, even when that meant they suffered further abuse themselves, when they had little reserve left for themselves after responding to their children's needs, or when setting up new lives for themselves.

The discrepancy between these findings and those reported in the literature have various explanations. First, the timing of the interviews in this study may account for these women's perceptions of their mothering. These women were removed from the immediate abuse, and all had relative certainty about shelter and finances in their lives. The women in the present study, speaking in retrospect, shared stories of being available for their children throughout the abuse, through leaving, through finding shelter, and to the present day. Through the entire process, these women said mothering was a source of strength for them. The present study's focus on the women's perspective of motherhood may have elicited responses wherein concern for the children is central. It may be that they have reconstructed their story with their children's needs as a priority despite some periods in their process during which they could not have been fully accessible to their children. Their recollections may have created a context in which they could reframe their stories in a more favourable

light and make meaning of the suffering they had experienced. Alternatively, it may be that most researchers focus their attention on various aspects of the abuse context, privileging evidence for the extent of the trauma of the abuse rather than evidence of the women's capacity to survive it. It is clear that further study is warranted to learn more about the relationship between violence and parenting and to make sense of the manifestations of abuse upon mothers at various phases of their recovery process.

Mothers who leave: Challenges and complications

Women were faced with many private challenges when attempting to leave their abusive relationships. Their own previously held notions of family and their children's emotional needs further complicated these challenges. Women found creative ways to manage the violence in order to support their ideals of family and to create sense of normalcy for their children while still in the relationship and to protect both their children and themselves. However, for all of these women, leaving also meant encountering shame, poverty, fear, and uncertainty.

Ideology of family

At some point in the interviews, each of these women revealed having loved their partners and having wanted an intact family. All of the women in this study felt guilt associated with taking their children away from their fathers and fragmenting the family, no matter how uninvolved these men had been with their children and no matter how violent the

relationship. Women also worried about the impact on their children of living in a so-called broken family.

The process of leaving a relationship began long before the actual event of separation, and emerged directly out of their efforts to creatively manage as an intact family. Women began this process by resisting the control their partners exercised over them. Some women attempted to become the perfect mother raising perfect children so that the abusers would not find fault with their mothering. Women studied the patterns within the abuse and eventually became adept at countering the control of their partners. They would often modify their behaviour in ways that would minimize the abuse of themselves and of their children.

However limited the range of agency that these efforts revealed, the women experienced them as a form of exercising control over their situations. For example, despite their partner's attempts to control the way they related to their children, these women would find ways to parent their children according to their own values. If they could effectively manage the violence and maintain an intact family for themselves and their children, the women stayed within the relationship.

Historically, women who have been abused have been labeled as overly dependent, helpless, and passive victims of abuse (Douglas, 1987; Walker, 1979). However, more recently, researchers have moved away from pathologizing women and have framed women's experiences as active and deliberate when responding to the abuse (Gondolf, 1990; Hoff, 1990; Kelly, 1988). Regardless, the notions of 'learned helplessness' and 'battered

woman syndrome' still dominate much of the thinking toward women who have been battered. These ideas obscure the active role that these women may play in some aspects of their relationships.

Mahoney (1994) contributed to this body of literature that focuses on the agency that women exercise in abusive relationships. She challenged the notions of passivity and 'victim' for women who have been battered. She argued that women exercise agency within their victimization. The findings of this study also contribute to this body of literature in that the women of this study showed remarkable agency in spite of an overt appearance of passivity while they attempted to maintain their ideals of family.

Mothering in Uncertainty

Leaving a relationship when children are involved is complicated. As the stories of these women explain, these complications are related to such factors as financial worries, the removal of children from their friends and schools, fear of partners apprehending children and guilt for the women.

All of the women in this study were thrust into some level of poverty by virtue of leaving their abusive relationships. This poverty created uncertainty about their ability to provide for their children and about whether they had done the right thing in leaving. Many women questioned themselves about the kind of mother that would take their children from a life of relative privilege to a life in which they worried about their next meal and shelter. It was difficult for women to explain to young children why they had to move or why they had

to be secretive about their lives. In addition, these women often lived in fear for their safety and the safety of their children. Responding to these challenges coloured women's experience of motherhood in the aftermath of their abusive relationships.

Many nurses and health care professionals may come from a background that makes it difficult for them to empathize with the intense fear of poverty that women in our society have, and so may not recognize the power that this fear has over women who are considering leaving an abusive relationship. Accordingly, nurses and health care professionals may tend to minimize the implications of poverty, especially in the context of abuse. Single mothers in Canada are most likely to live in poverty; have little opportunity to earn adequate income, and are most likely to use food banks for their families (Evans, 1998). Poverty, for women, "carries with it a sense of powerlessness, exclusion, and stigma" (Evans, p. 51). Swift (1998) proposes that many of these same professionals cannot discriminate between the effects of poverty and the effects of child neglect. Although women who experience violence and live in poverty are marginalized, racialized, and discriminated against (Swift), health care professionals may not appreciate the dynamics of these factors in shaping women's lives.

It can be incredibly difficult to be poor in this society. Fear of poverty must therefore be recognized as a legitimate fear that women leaving abusive relationships hold. Nurses working with women who have been battered must acknowledge these fears as legitimate and support women in their process of beginning to consider leaving an abusive relationship.

The Aftermath: Influences on Mothering

The findings of this study suggest that mothers remain connected to their abusers through their children and this connection influences their mothering in particular ways. The women in this study did not anticipate the extent to which their children kept them connected to their abusers. All of them faced issues related to their partner's access to the children and experienced worries associated with visitation by the same partners that had been abusive toward them. The hand-over of children was often particularly problematic for women in this study. As women experienced these connections with their abusive partners, they came to understand that aspects of their mothering would always be linked to their abusers because of the children they shared.

The findings of this study support the findings of other studies in which women revealed their worries about their children (Henderson, 1990; Hilton, 1992). These studies have found that visitation and access are often problematic for both women and children. The findings of this study also extend the work of previous studies by describing in some detail the extent to which this connection through children perpetuates the elements of the abusive relationships within the women's lives.

Like all women involved in the breakdown of partner relationships, the women leaving abusive relationships must contend with their children being in the middle of their struggles. They must reconcile themselves to ongoing concern about the parenting skills of their children's other parent as well as worries about how children are being affected by the

separation. However, beyond these usual worries, the women in this study feared their partner's abuse being directed at the children, their partner apprehending the children, and their own lack of control over changes in supervised access.

Landmark studies (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) support the notion that contact with both parents is important for the development of children in cases of divorce. However, such studies do not normally consider the unique issues associated with abusive relationships. There is now a large body of literature available on the complexities of custody and shared parenting in the case of abusive relationships (e.g., Chesler, 1991; Clark, 1990; Newmark, Harrell, & Salem, 1995). The issues of separation and sharing custody of children necessitate a high degree of parental cooperation, which is not a typical feature of relationships in which abuse has been a factor (Clark). The issues associated with custody and access of children are recognized as intensely emotionally charged. Clearly, when there has been abuse within a relationship, it would be expected that many of the typical issues parents face would become complicated and exaggerated. The uniqueness of these kinds of custody and access situations requires that women should be offered referral to organizations that are up to date on laws that affect women and that offer advocacy and information for women who have been battered.

Rebuilding lives: Experiences of growth and sense of self

In my analysis of women's accounts of motherhood I came to understand women's sense of self as an integral component of creating a picture of their lives as mothers. Each

woman talked about how her sense of self was eroded by the abuse in her life and how being a mother enhanced her sense of self in particular ways. Women in this study describe growth and change that evolved toward a greater awareness and discovery of self.

Living with abuse: Motherhood and the Self

The findings of this study support the perspective that women's self-esteem and sense of self is transformed throughout abuse in an intimate relationship (Kearney, 1999; Lecovin & Penfold, 1996; Lempert, 1994; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). The women in the present study described a "slow giving away of self" that was due to the violence in their lives. However, the findings of this study also suggest that the women experienced resilience to the loss of self-esteem that needs to be explored further. For many, motherhood represented a source of strength that may have mediated their loss of self.

The findings of this study support the notion that motherhood is a valued role for women in society, is a vehicle for enhancing a woman's sense of self (Gordon, 1988; Hartrick, 1997), and is accompanied by a heightened awareness of the self as undergoing a unique experience (Leifer, 1980). This heightened sense of self is shaped by a variety of factors both personal and contextual. Although the conditions of mothering may "foster the subtle loss of self-expression, they also provide an opportunity for new parts of the self to be discovered, to know existing parts in more depth, and to experience the possibilities with the self to a greater degree" (Hartrick, p. 273)

According to Hartrick (1997), women go through a process of losing or denying parts of the self when they assume the role of mother. The women in the Hartrick study slowly reconnected with their self in a different way. This shift of self was equated with "moving away from the enactment of roles in society's script, to expressing and experiencing the self" and engaging in the "joys and risks of living life" (p. 273). Women described a balance between loss of self and motherhood providing new parts of the self to be discovered.

What happens to mothers in terms of how they change and develop when they live with abuse? The topic of how women develop and grow through mothering in abuse has not been well explored. However, Stark and Flitcraft (1988) describe a process whereby women engage in meaningful practices with respect to the self because of and despite the abuse.

Women strive for selfhood (how they would like to be) and nurturance (good mothering) within the constraints of the mothering role, in part because children are the only source of nurturance in violent homes and in part because, as they define their options within a world bounded by a male *telos*, battered women lose access to the strains of resistance and initiative through which to establish themselves as something other than *his*. (p. 112)

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's (1986) have developed a framework that depicts women's ways of knowing and may be useful for understanding how women in this study conceptualized the self. When women in this study spoke of the abuse, they used language that depicted them as the objects in their stories, controlled by external forces during the period of time in which they were under the influence of their partners. During these periods, they described little awareness of themselves and often relied on external

voices to determine who they were as people. When the women began the process of moving away from their partners and leaving the relationships, they depicted themselves as the subjects of their stories, or subjective knowers. Subjective knowing may involve being on a quest for self and this may include turning away from the external authority in their lives. At this point women had "few tools for expressing themselves or persuading other to listen" as subjective knowers (Belenky et al., p. 134). Most of the women in this study eventually listened to their inner voices, reclaimed their selves, and became constructed knowers through the aftermath of violence.

This framework may be useful for beginning to understand how women's sense of self is developed. However, amidst the adversity, the women in this study also exhibited resilience that preserved the self and possibly assisted the self to survive under extremely challenging circumstances. From their perspectives, these women were able to exercise some agency within their relationships, even during the worst of times. They learned to both cope with and counter their partner's control. Merritt-Gray and Wuest's (1995) work reflects similar ideas in relation to the ways that a woman may retain a sense of self within an abusive relationship. These researchers found that the process of countering the abuse while remaining in the relationship reflected a "refusal to surrender" to the abuse and was a step in a woman's process of "reclaiming the self" (p. 400). The present study describes how being a good mother contributed to this process of reclaiming the self. These mothers valued and

found strength in their parenting, and often used this strength in the gradual process of making major life changes.

Clearly, there is need of a more full consideration of how women actually function and experience themselves in the role of mother when they are involved in abusive relationships. We need to learn more about how women begin to turn that quiet strength into action, and how to support them whatever stage they may be at in this process.

Summary

The findings of this study begin to address some of the issues that mothers who have been battered experience. Women experience influences on their mothering; they experience complications and complexities as they leave relationships, and they face many more challenges after they have left the relationship. When women are able to rebuild their lives, they experience positive growth and self worth. We need to continue to explore the aspects of motherhood for these women that enhance their resilience to the abuse and support women throughout their efforts to remain in relationships and after they have left. The results of this study may begin to give us insight into some of these issues.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered. My motivation for this study was based on my own experience working with mothers who have been battered and by my beliefs that women parent their children in meaningful ways even when being abused. The literature available on the topic of the experience of motherhood in the context of abuse was extremely limited. My concerns about this limited knowledge lead to the question of how well nurses are able to understand and respond to women in their practice. This response would entail fostering relationships with women in ways that might provide the necessary support. The findings of this study focused on women's perceptions of their mothering experiences while living in abuse. Women also spoke of their lives after leaving the abuse and how the ongoing connection to their partners has perpetuated the abuse in their lives.

Five women who had experienced battering and who had children participated in this study. I interviewed each woman, asking each about her experiences of motherhood. The women spoke freely about painful memories of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. They also talked a great deal about themselves as mothers, and of the ongoing challenges in their lives. In the second interview, when I asked women to comment on my interpretations of their stories, I uncovered new findings that both extended and clarified my thinking.

The findings of this study showed that women experience many complex challenges while parenting in an abusive relationship and that many of these extend beyond the relationship once women leave. Women were influenced by the abuse in their lives, by their perceived social ideals of motherhood, and by their concerns for both their children and themselves. Once free, women found a sense of meaning in being a mother that helped them to regain a sense of themselves, helped them support their children, and helped them to experience personal growth.

Study Conclusions

For women in this study, being in an abusive relationship had an important influence on mothering, living up to the ideals of motherhood, and the complexity of being a mother.

Within the context of an abusive relationship, women use various strategies to protect and care for their children. Women protect themselves and their children by responding to the abuse in ways that minimize the intensity, duration, and/or frequency of the abuse. Controlling behaviors of partners influence parenting options for the mothers and alters their ability to parent their children according to their own values. Women use creative strategies to manage the violence of their partners, including monitoring the partner's behaviour, figuring out patterns and triggers for the abuse, and protecting their children from witnessing or experiencing the abuse whenever possible. Deciding to leave an abusive relationship is challenging and complicated for mothers. Concern for the children can account for both staying in and leaving abusive relationships. Women feel a tension between taking their children from a connected sense of family and leaving abusive situation. They have concerns for both their own and their children's safety.

The aftermath of an abusive relationship has an ongoing influence on mothers. Women experience ongoing fears because of the connection to their partners through their children. They are afraid that their partners might apprehend their children, that violence may escalate, and that they may be unable to support their children on their own. Women experience a variety of both helpful and unhelpful sources of support throughout their experiences of abuse. They may look for support for staying in the relationship when they perceive that leaving is not a viable option and help toward leaving when the violence becomes unmanageable or their children become unhappy. Perceived or actual sources of support are an important element in the processes of leaving the relationship and rebuilding a life. Women experience a loss of self and self-esteem throughout an abusive relationship. However, mothers find parenting a source of strength in the process of successfully rebuilding their lives, experiencing growth, and regaining self worth after they have been in abusive relationships.

Implications

The findings of their study have implications that are important for nursing practice, education, and research.

Implications for Nursing Practice

The findings of this study summarize the women's stories of their experiences of motherhood in the context of abusive relationships. Women revealed that, because their lives with children were very complex, they needed to find creative ways to manage the violence when leaving was not a viable option. This study reveals that women find strength in their

mothering even in the context of abuse in their lives. Thus mothering plays a dynamic role in the process of coming to terms with the implications of relationships shattered by abuse, in complicating the options that women may believe that they have available to them, and also in providing them with the strength to make difficult decisions when the time is right.

The findings of this study yield a number of implications related to establishing relationships with women. Clearly, a significant problem for these women was disclosing their situation and identifying potential safe sources of support. It would seem important, therefore, for nurses to understand that it is important to develop trusting relationships with their clients and be particularly open to the stories women tell that might help them identify such situations in their practice.

Regardless of the clinical setting in which nurses practice, they should be on the alert for the possibility that the women and children they care for may be in an abusive situation and may give subtle cues about it to the nurse. In general nurses must be prepared to listen to women in ways that honour each individual story and allow for recognition of each woman's strengths as well as her challenges. The women in this study told stories which demonstrated their commitment to their children and acknowledged the role of motherhood as a source of strength. By listening to the stories of women in an open and non-judgmental manner, without preconceived notions of women's lives and challenges, nurses may be better positioned to gain the trust of their clients and to provide meaningful support at critical junctures within the process of making major life decisions.

When interacting with women who are in or have been in abusive relationships, nurses should attend to and validate some of the creative strategies women use to remain in abusive relationships rather than assuming women who have been battered are passive and dependent. Nurses should support and mobilize women's mothering ideals rather than assuming they are bad mothers if they stay, by recognizing that their fears about poverty, sustainability, support, and shelter are valid. It is important for nurses to learn how to provide support that is relevant to the stage of the staying/leaving process that the woman is in. By accepting the contradictions and ambiguities in women's lives, nurses have an opportunity to foster women's sense of agency and perhaps make a significant difference in their lives.

Finally, the findings of this study confirm the very complex and demanding circumstances in which women find themselves once they do leave their abusive partners. Consistent with the role of nursing is program development, advocacy and health policy work toward creating the conditions that will better support women in this process, and also reduce the fears of the future that may cause them to remain in relationships long beyond the point of safety. By recognizing the legitimate fears and complex challenges these women face, nurses and others can work to ensure that society supports them and their children in increasingly humane and responsible ways. Thus, the findings have implications for nursing practice at the individual interactional level as well as at the level of program development and social reform.

Implications for Nursing Education

The implications of the research findings for nursing education are far reaching. Since nurses care for women who have been battered and their children, we must include the dynamics of intimate partner abuse in our nursing education curricula. The present educational processes in nursing education offer nurses the opportunity to think critically about their practice.

However, with health issue such as abuse, nurses may not fully understand how to support and care for women when there has been little exploration of values, beliefs, and assumptions about this problem.

An opportunity exists for nurse educators to locate the discussion of women who are abused, and the complexities of mothering in this context, in their current content of curricula and in their clinical practice. Caring curricula emphasize concepts that are important for working with woman who have been battered such as oppression, women's health, and nurse-client relationships. Discussions of the issues associated with abuse in intimate relationships must be located alongside these concepts as well as within their broader social context. Theories such as critical social theory could begin to provide a framework for nurses to understand the forces at play for women who have been battered. Educators must also use clinical practice opportunities to discuss these complex issues. When working with students in the clinical setting, educators can draw from and critically analyze hospital and unit policies that affect women who have been battered. Opportunities for learning clinical practice in such complex social situations would provide nurses with a foundation for providing better care for the women

they encounter and providing mechanisms by which women can be supported. If nurses are not offered these opportunities, they may fall back on societal stereotypes of women who are battered and motherhood and make unfounded assumptions about the needs of women.

Implications for Nursing Research

Historically, research in the area of battering has traditionally focused on the question of why women remain in abusive relationships. However, in recent years researchers have attempted to capitalize on women's strength and agency to promote healthy lifestyles. Although this study uncovered many of the abilities of mothers, it is important to extend this research to ask *how* women are best supported by the health professionals in their lives and *how* women were able to parent their children in meaningful ways despite the violence in their lives.

The women in this study also experienced poverty, often for an extended period of time, in their struggles to live free of violence. The resilience that these women demonstrated throughout their abusive relationship, into poverty, and beyond is a particularly important finding in this research. Factors that might support and enhance such resilience would warrant more extensive investigation. Furthermore, research must extend to the level of social policy, questioning how policy perpetuates the poverty of women from abusive relationships. A feminist methodology such as feminist participatory action research may provide a useful mechanism by which to uncover more extensive understanding of the dynamics involved in abusive relationships, and help inform us about gaps and inconsistencies within current health care and social policies. In the context of research applying such methods, women would

become more actively involved in shaping the knowledge that is necessary in order to better serve them and their children when they are in abusive relationships and also when they attempt to leave.

Conclusion

In this study I explored the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered. The women in this study gave of their time and their stories because they too believed that it was important for others to understand their experiences. The main findings of this study centered on the challenges and complexities of being a mother in an abusive relationship. If nurses are to work with women who have been battered they need to be supported in their efforts to assist women to build on their capacities and draw attention to some of the contradictions that women face in their daily lives. In order to accomplish this, nurses must learn to accept the ambiguities and contradictions in the lives of the women for whom they care.

The complex lives of mothers who live in abusive situations have not been adequately explored by health researchers, and there is much that remains to be learned about their coping strategies, the processes by which they enact changes in their lives, and the optimal mechanisms by which they can be supported. Clearly mothers can have a passionate commitment to their parenting role, even in the context of violent households. This commitment can complicate the decisions and choices that they make with regard to leaving an abusive relationship. At the same time, it can provide them with the strength and courage that they need to go forward into an uncertain future. By understanding the strengths and

complexities that these mothers experience, nurses can begin to offer meaningful and realistic support.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

UBC School of Nursing Letterhead

Study: The Experience of Motherhood for Women Who Have Been Battered

My name is Lori Irwin and I am a registered nurse who is studying toward her Master's of Science in Nursing degree. I am conducting a study to learn about the experience of motherhood for women who have been battered by their partners. I am aware that many women parent their children in meaningful ways and their experiences of motherhood may not be fully understood by health care professionals. I am interested in this study because I believe that increasing understanding about these practices will provide guidance for health care providers and bring attention to the ways that women care for their children within an environment of battering.

This letter is to ask you to consider participation in my study. Participation would involve two meetings with me at a convenient time and place for you. In an initial interview lasting one to two hours, I will ask you about your experience of motherhood while living in a violent relationship. The interview will be audiotape recorded to ensure accurate data collection. The second meeting will take about one hour of your time. The purpose of the second meeting will be to share results and clarify my understanding of what you have told me and invite you to challenge, elaborate on, or confirm my developing understanding of motherhood from your perspective.

Confidentiality of participants will be maintained; name or inference in any reporting will not identify participants. Code numbering will identify the tapes and only I will be aware of which tape corresponds to which participant. The code numbering and tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. The only people who have access to the audiotapes or transcripts will be two professors who are members of my thesis committee, a professional transcriptionist, and myself.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form at the first meeting to indicate willingness to participate and be audiotaped. You are free to refuse to participate in specific parts of the interview. You will be asked for some demographic data, such as years living in and/or out of violence, income, and education. Demographic data and results will be reported in my Master's thesis and may be reported in a professional publication and at professional conferences. You can decide to withdraw consent at any time without any possible jeopardy to your current or future health care or social services.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study: The Experience of motherhood for women who have been battered

Interview Questions:

1. As you know I am interested in women's stories of motherhood. I wonder if you could think back to the time when you had your first child and describe what motherhood was like for you.
2. Who were important people to you when you first became a mother and why?
3. How would you describe what motherhood was like for you at that time?
4. How might you describe your experience of motherhood now that is similar or different from how you saw yourself then?
5. Can you tell me about a particular story about being a mother that stands out for you as either challenging or satisfying? Can you tell me about what made the situation difficult or satisfying?
6. Have you always had these ideas of what motherhood would be like?
If not, what has changed for you?
7. Do you think that the way you see yourself has changed over the years of being a mother?
8. Looking back now on being a mother, would you say that there are any ways in which the abuse in your life has changed what motherhood means to you?

Prompts and Probes:

Tell me a little more about...

How has that affected your relationship with your children?

I'm interested in...

How does that feel?

What meaning does that have for you?

What happened next?

What influenced the decisions you made?

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Study: The Experience of Motherhood for Women who have been BatteredPersonal Information:

Code Name: _____

Date of Birth/Age: _____

Highest level of education: _____

How many children do you have? _____

What are their ages and sexes? _____

Income:

Personal income from all sources within your household (when with partner) _____

Personal access to income (when with partner) _____

If out of relationship, brief description of economic impact of violence _____
_____Living with battering:

At present _____

If yes, how long? _____

In shelter _____

With family _____

Out of relationship _____

If yes, how long? _____

Thank You

APPENDIX E: INITIATION OF DELICIOUS

Gail Alexander

There once was as stone house with a little window overlooking a magnificent garden full of the most beautiful flowers. However, a high wall surrounded the garden and no one dared enter for it was ruled by a man who was an illusion not to be bought. He could not tell his heart from red nor his frown from a wrinkled lip. All he know was the bitterness of his quarrel. Driven to a cutting hatred he spat out fragments of my core and covered me with shame. He was your father, and in this stone house we sat for three long years daring only to look out the little window at the garden denied to us. There was poverty of kindness in your father's house. Caught in his awful game I shrank to a faded almost-unable-to-trace-the-outline-way. Every so often during these troubled years a chill would brush by us and bring an expression to my eyes that you did not understand, as if at such times I would say to myself, "Poor child, I have made a dangerous bargain without knowing." And for a moment only my dark eyes would stir in an old dance. Beyond the window, reflected in my eyes, pigeons brooded up and down the tin roof with their hands clasped behind their backs sputtering, "Inside her flowing unknown in her blood..." If only I could have dismantled their meaning.

This one evening I passed by the window and glanced out at the dark elbow of the pear tree standing under the moon in the centre of the garden. She crooked her bony wooden finger and pointed to a shadow that appeared to be a frightened and unkempt little girl. This shadow was peeking through the branches astounded that someone had noticed her. She was reaching with her thin hand and crying for she was afraid that she was unloved. Her tears coursed down her legs becoming the roots of the pear tree that sank deep into the earth. Pungent dark earth, waiting for hands to plunge and turn, to uncover a cradle for seed-dreams. Earth that was forbidden to us by the acrimony of your father. This was the moment my sickened gut told me who shadow-girl was, the moment I knew that some people kill with arrows and some with traps. I was certain we were trapped, in part, by my skin so innocent it was almost translucent. Only the cold linoleum under my feet kept me from falling. My laugh banged against the window as I watched my silent mother waken from her slumber. My child, I recognized that I must wake and think of you before we both slept The Eternal Sleep. There was already enough history and I could not tolerate you perishing, your sparkle gone away.

Through darkness into view your fathers unlaidd ghost came and stuck in my throat. Migration of soul was necessary in the face of this bitter truth. Beyond the window the pigeons brooded up and down the tin roof with their hands clasped behind their backs sputtering. "It is for the doer The Crone answers sharp." This time I was sure they said that you were born for more than specter-gray under a fruitless moon while sunbeams pass by you. The laws of women allow not the smallest allowance for slavery in innocence, just as truth sits on our lips as shadows

and symbols of the shield. You are so absolutely good. This at least I knew. I was to take you to a place of fulfillment on this kindly earth. I flung shrewdness on like a velvet cloak leaving with you in my arms, stone and curse upon my back. Even at that I felt a stillness, like a lingering dewdrop, that filled me with the most amazing sense of peace. Yes, destiny waits for one lone soul to shield the blow from a father's fist.

I am your shield
 Look in my quiet face
 Within one short hour are years of grace
 Spirit of womb, red vase
 So bright and deep dear
 In all four seasons of the year.

We moved far that night under the face of Mother Moon. Her hand was on my shoulder and it was comfortable. Momentum flickered around me but it was fleeting; revealing half but half concealing the murky darkness of my affected state. I was scared hard stiff of the truth, of not knowing the truth, cautious of being stopped, taken over, sucked up, or digested. The line between feeling and numb was a jig saw of everything I couldn't stand, didn't want, felt helpless about and wanted to be done with. For a long time we had lived in a gutted-flame black place. Nobody plugged our ears when we screamed. I never wanted to be in That Place again. I was agreeable now to things that startled and even awed me to ensure that we didn't travel the passage back to heartsick. To be fair to this specific part of our story there was a bittersweet joy clutched greedily happily in my hand. I remember smiling slightly into my corners, hollows, and curves loving that lovely and difficult opening where smooth operation broke down and cunning entered from below. I preferred to be dismantled because I could not have kept on the way I was before. Here at least was the choice to do one thing or do the other. I didn't want to own my surrender to the predator. Who wants to live with that? But to claim it brought us to the edge we needed to fall over. There was a Great Something waiting to help us. Of this I was sure. We went on. The pigeons brooded up and down the face of Mother Moon with their hands clasped behind their backs sputtering, "Under the bones of who she was born..."

In the morning we arrived at a shelter. Here we stayed for seven nights and seven days. During this time not a cycle passed over the earth where our naked selves were not deepened by the darkest grief. All the while Night-Watchers brushed by us happy to protect us. On the seventh cycle your father flexed in to our breakfast table. "My dear," he said with condescension, slapping his hands down on the table by way of introduction, "Things can't go on like this. Perhaps you don't realize that but I do. Your proper place is in my home baking a brown loaf to go around this family circle. Come home so I can forgive your peculiarity." I had already lost what I believed in back then, had uncrinched after years of living hunched over, had learned my real life for the first time. Being much more fierce and much more peaceful I saw behind his candied tongue. Your father was plotting again. I whiffed his traps. How they were made and how they were laid. I told him that we would not go back to his frozen garden whatever the

suffering, enduring, or striving. This family circle had slivered through a chink in the floor. He got real angry. He hoped I did a desperate outrage to myself and clattered out with bite of a critical mosquito. So we became outlanders in the household of the village. The pigeons brooded up and down the breakfast table with their hands clasped behind their backs sputtering, "The initiates know well enough." They had caught my clear copious fall, yet unknown. There was no going back. I sang to you then. All the while you sat there listening happy just for that.

Solo is
 New di..nem..sions
 New dimensions are...unthinkable
 The att..ain..able
 Sim..plic..ity
 Blanket of stars
 Solo...is
 Space..to..breath
 Is expansion
 Of lung...perspective...sight
 Solo is hind..sight fore..sight in..sight
 The sight...is ...essential
 Chan..ging
 Conn..ect..ed
 Sight is eas..ing
 Eas..ing is Per..spec..tive
 Is belief
 The ay..gency of nature
 Ay..gency of watermelon snow
 Menstrual flow
 Menstrual flow is earth's way
 So..lo is earth's way
 A...new...way
 My life's journ..ay
 Sim..plic..ity
 Sol..i..tude
 Solo attitude
 Flow.. a new way

Since there is always more opportunity to fashion our lives we went on to somewhere more permanent and settled. I wanted to pry things open and pin things down. I wanted eyes that saw and ears that heard. I knew what I wanted but didn't know how to find it so we went about our daily living and I trusted that what we needed would come. All the while I nosed out my wounds sure this was the place to start. *Sniff sniff I smell it, snuffle nose ouch it's my wound, yes*

it's old and infected, affecting my system. Sniff snuffle it's deep. I have long ignored it. Hmm time to cleanse, lick lick lick, locate penetrate. It sounds yelp, feels white-tender, smells singed. Lick wince whimper, snuffle. It's deep, will take a while. I'll lay and rest now, later lick some more. This was an odd time because we were not rich but we were fed. We could not see but we weren't lost. We were alone but we were loved

Before dawn one day your father sent a little white piece of paper from the system that suffers too much from the cult of the Laird. The paper stated that you were compelled to visit no matter the disturbing attachment. This caused me to ache with a peculiar grace. On one hand I hoped that with me removed you could have a loving kinship with your father. On the other I understood you would be his vengeance. I asked myself, muttered to myself really, "He wants to take you and starch you flat so you end up distorted beyond recognition within his lifeless value system? The brittle... What would ever incite me to allow you to become more than silent?" was just my word for it. Rooted in this was my sense of what would happen if I didn't follow the Lairds' directive. You would have been lost to me forever under the might vested to Those Pricks. I had to follow their command. It was a joke that happened to be in fashion, looking so laundered on their official paper. I determined to guard you in whichever way seemed most canny. I was not so naïve anymore. His consumption would sting hurt and do this or that and I was not happy about it. So the reality was this. You were going to be aquatinted with grief, and a Great Something was keeping pace in this chaos, and I was going to put the bandaids on you, and it took three weeks to swallow that pill. You did not go empty-handed. The pigeons brooded up and down the paper with their hands clasped behind their backs sputtering, "The task is to pass through the land of death as a living creature."

In fleeting time you came back from your father's house and told me of; his deathless ghosts that crept between the dirty linen. You told me things ribbed and edged in steel, your face old, your mind old. I rose and half fell in the scent of the sewer. This was beyond anything the Lairds could justify. You should not be flattened in a world I never made. It was time to take our leave until this could happen or that could happen.

Some miles past and we were both absolutely fatigued. We sat upon a circle of moss in the shade and half in sun. I did not distrust the silence breathing through the monastic aisles of the woods. It went something like this, "Agnes dear this is a strange affair. If you are wondering, there is at least one more who waits for you. Julia's lips do smile. Turn one more corner and kiss her." It was as if all the combined hosts from our lower home were rushing forward to strengthen us. So by a simple turning of a certain street corner we found ourselves the Chronic Hotel. It was the place where at night your story stands so still that even the dogs get confused. I did not particularly want to be there and perhaps neither did you but it was the site to learn my way. To clear our way. Behind the counter was a raven-haired other who had a world behind her back. "Strange and sometimes splendid things happen before most us get up on a Saturday morning." She spilled yackety-yak through red lipstick lips. As she showed us our room I wondered if she would outlive her ripple of laughter.

Following dusk there was a pat at the door. Outside a woman smiled a fangy smile with the worlds of coal and ice in her hands. The character on her face was at all times remarkable. Hers was a face that fixed you. She frankly called gentle, "I am you. Come, I have truths to tell you that grow high on cedars." She turned to go and over her shoulder she flipped, "Those that wear hoods will fight now and forever. It is time for you to be home before you become a dear dead woman laying in her dusky twilight. By and by you will find others who hunt the same land as yours. Hand in hand you will teach the Order of Angels." Thereupon her breath entered mine linking me to the beginning layers of her hidden healing structures, the vital ceremonies of widow and nine maids; for my lips, from the well. Then she was gone.

We found ourselves at a latticed door opening inwards. Inside was a room of tapestry-on-white, jasmine, and French doors leading out to the kitchen garden brimming with verdant roots and dank smells of moist grit. Hushed, green, and peaceful, it was that kind of place, inborn from the quiet of the past, taking us to a time far away in a luscious world as warm, juicy, and sweet as butter and honey. Thankfully we slipped tranquillity on like a pelt and we were brought into a still moment, a simple moment. One that was our own, our very own initiation of delicious.

My child we are now at the midpoint in our formation, held in love, yet I sense that we are poised to make another slow dive into the breathing forms of inner life. It will proceed as nature wills. The pigeons brooded up and down the garden with their hands behind their backs sputtering, "For her children she will fight. For the boy biting the fence she will fight. For the girl in the sewer she will fight. For the soul that has never known light she will fight. Eyes and eyes that know child blight. For you child she fights." What is this joy that no mother falters but knows what she must do?