UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship:

A Grounded Theory Investigation

By

Tresa Agnew

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
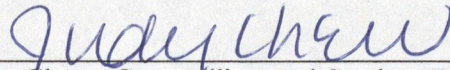
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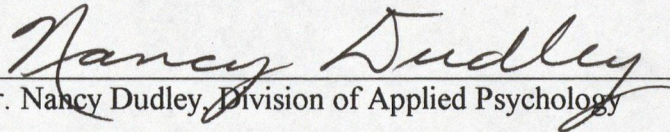

DIVISION OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

JUNE, 2003
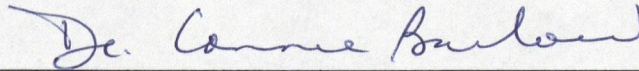
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship: A Grounded Theory Investigation" submitted by Tresa Agnew in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Science.

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ABSTRACT

One of the most pervasive human rights issues in the world is abuse against women. It is a health and social problem of significant proportion in Canada. Although there is literature on the abusive relationship, events leading to dissolutions, the crises of leaving, and the more immediate aftermath, there is a lack of research regarding women who are sustaining the separation. Thus, in this study, the researcher explored women's experience of sustaining the separation to gain a greater understanding of this process. The purpose of conducting this research was to create a theoretical model for understanding women's experiences of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship.

Participants were recruited by poster advertisement at various agencies across Calgary and the University of Calgary. Seven women participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Each participant was over the age of 18 and had left her abuser for a period of twelve months or longer.

The grounded theory method was used in this study to discover the process involved for women sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The process was discovered to consist of the four following phases: disempowerment of self, empowering the self, regaining self, and reclaiming self. The core category identified in this study was developing a greater sense of self.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In order to become more knowledgeable and to gain a deeper understanding of the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship, women's stories have to be told. At the core of this study are stories from seven women who have experienced the process of leaving and who are sustaining that decision. These women each provided detailed and powerful accounts of their experience.

This chapter discusses the significance of the problem, the study's purpose, specific aims of the study, key terms, reasons for interest in the topic, significance of the study, and provides an overview of the subsequent chapters.

Significance of the Problem

One of the most pervasive human rights issues in the world is abuse against women (Sev'er, 1997). Abuse against women has emerged as a global issue (Edleson & Eisikovits, 1996). Partner abuse is a significant health and social problem and the occurrence of this abuse is widespread across societies, cultures, religions, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic strata, in both developed and developing countries. However, the frequency of partner abuse appears to fluctuate across cultures, despite the widespread occurrence (Hofeller, 1982, 1983; MacLeod, 1980; NiCarthy, 1987; Statistics Canada, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

An understanding of the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship is extremely important. However, emphasis in the existing literature has been on the abusive relationship, events leading to dissolutions, the crises of leaving, and the more immediate aftermath (Wuest, 1999). There has been little focus on the

women who have sustained the separation. Thus, it is my intent to interview women who are in the process of sustaining the separation from an abusive relationship to gain further knowledge of this process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge and understanding of the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. A substantive theory will be generated to provide a deeper comprehension of this complex process. The findings of this study will contribute to the limited, but existing body of knowledge. Through learning about this process, it is anticipated that we will also have a better understanding of the struggles that are entailed in sustaining the separation. In addition, it is also expected that through the interviews and learning about this process we will also gain a better understanding of the factors that the women have found to be helpful in order for this process to be successful. Further, it is anticipated that we will learn about the factors that have facilitated or inhibited the women during this process.

Above all, it is my hope that the findings of this study will empower those women who are thinking about, or who are in the process of leaving, their abusive partner. It takes courage and strength to leave an abusive relationship. Most women leave the relationship and return several times before leaving for good; hence leaving has been understood as a process (Landenburger, 1989; Lockley, 1999; Ulrich, 1991, 1993). Further, it is my hope that women thinking about leaving or who are in the process of leaving will gain an understanding of how other women were able to sustain the separation from their abuser, as well as become further aware of what has aided these women in this process.

Specific Aims

The specific aim of this study is to generate a theoretical framework for understanding the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. It is expected that the findings of this study will help to explain what women and helpers can anticipate when women sustain the separation from an abusive relationship. An additional aim of the study is to gain further comprehension of the factors that have been helpful to these women during this process.

Key Terms

The Calgary Domestic Violence Committee adopted Nixon's (2002) definition of domestic abuse:

> Domestic abuse is the attempt, act or intent of someone within a relationship where the relationship is characterized by intimacy, dependency or trust, to intimidate either by threat or by the use of physical force on another person or property. The purpose of the abuse is to control and/or exploit through neglect, intimidation, inducement of fear or by inflicting pain.

I have chosen to use the term "partner abuse" to refer to abuse that occurs between individuals involved in "married relationships," "common-law relationships," "dating relationships," and "same sex relationships." Although the term domestic violence is frequently used to refer to this phenomenon, partner abuse more accurately reflects the literature that is relevant to the research study. Domestic violence more commonly includes not only partner abuse, but also alternate forms of violence in the family such as child abuse. Marital or spousal violence is another commonly utilized term referring to abuse that occurs between married individuals. Partner abuse, however takes into account abuse that occurs between nonmarital relationships, such as cohabiting relationships (Jasinski & Williams, 1998)

I decided to use the term partner abuse instead of partner violence because I wanted to include all forms of abuse and I believe this term more readily captures this. Focusing on abuse rather than violence is grounded in qualitative research with abused women, who explain that emotional or psychological harm are equally, or more detrimental, than the physical assaults they experience (MacLeod, 1980).

Kornblit (1994) has distinguished between abuse and violence:

> The former refers to actions which are harmful for the victim, both physically as well as mentally, committed or resulting from omission, carried out intentionally or not. Violence in a limited sense is used to refer to physical aggression. Maltreatment includes abuse (physical, sexual, and/or emotional) and neglect (physical, educational, and/or affective.)

Abusive behavior can take many forms including, verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, financial or economic, neglect, isolation, the violation of rights, and the creation of a general climate of fear. All forms of abusive behaviors are ways in which one human being is trying to have control and/or exploit or have power over another (Breines & Gordon, 1983; MacLeod, 1980; Nixon, 2002; Pence & Paymar, 1985; Walker 1990). Including all forms of abuse captures the complexity of abuse; emphasizing that there are a variety of damaging activities and that the consequences of abuse are more multifaceted than simple physical injury (Sev'er, 1997).

Physical abuse refers to any aggressive behavior that involves the intentional use of one's body against the body of another person in such a way that there is risk of injury, regardless of whether the behavior results in actual injury (Dutton, 1992). Examples include pushing, pinching, squeezing, shaking, grabbing, biting, slapping, punching, kicking, and choking. It also includes throwing objects or using a weapon (Dutton, 1992; Health Canada, 1996; Nixon, 2002).

Emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse is the infliction of emotional pain and suffering by a person or persons doing things to control or degrade another. This may include persistent verbal attacks on self-esteem, repeated accusations of infidelity or other misdeeds, threats of suicide, insulting, pressuring, isolating, threats of harm to others, control over friends, family, money, and/or freedom, and other expressions of anger, jealousy, and possessiveness (Health Canada, 1996; Nixon, 2002).

Sexual abuse describes any sexual activity performed against the wishes and consent of the victim. It includes being forced to engage in unwanted sex and to participate in unpleasant, violent, or frightening sexual acts (Health Canada, 1996; Nixon, 2002). Brownmiller's (1975) definition included any sexual intimacy forced on one person by another. This would refer to forcing an individual to remain nude, to engage in sexualized behaviors that may not necessarily involve physical contact (e.g., sexual dancing, dressing in particular ways), or to engage in sexual activity with animals, children, or objects.

Financial or economic abuse occurs when the abusive person does not allow the victim to have money or control over money. It also includes the abusive person accessing another person's funds without permission or using funds for purposes that the person has not approved (Nixon, 2002).

Isolation occurs when the victim is isolated from her family, friends, or community and is a way for the abusive person to stay in control. It may include not allowing one to speak to family and friends, or not assisting with transportation needs (Nixon, 2002).

Reasons for Interest in the Research Topic

I became interested in the area of abuse, especially partner abuse committed against women, while working at a women's shelter. At the shelter, I had the opportunity to counsel women who had left an abusive relationship. During my time working at the shelter, many women left the shelter and returned to their partner and then months later revisited the shelter. Thus, there was an understanding regarding some of the reasons why women leave and return. However, there was no follow-up work completed with those who never returned to their partner. An understanding of the process these women experienced while sustaining the separation was lacking.

On a personal level, my interest in the area increased further after learning that my aunt was in an abusive relationship. She endured many forms of abuse and decided to leave the relationship last summer. Subsequent to my aunt deciding to leave the relationship, I attempted to find resources, programs, and studies completed that would help her gain an understanding of the process ahead. To my astonishment, I found that research and programs were limited in this area. Therefore, I realized the need to complete research so women who are going through this process, or for therapists who are counselling women, would gain a greater understanding of what is involved.

Significance of the Study

I believe an understanding of the process of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship is important for the following reasons. Firstly, partner abuse against women is prevalent. It is reported that 50% of Canadian women over the age of 16 experience at least one incident of abuse and 29% of women experience abuse from their marital partner (Statistics Canada, 1993). As counsellors, I believe it is imperative that we

have an understanding of the dynamics of an abusive relationship and the process that is involved when women decide to leave the relationship and sustain that decision. Thus, the results of this study will have implications for counsellors working with clients who are sustaining the separation from an abusive partner. Secondly, as mentioned briefly above, research in this area is limited. This research will further add to our understanding of the process involved in sustaining the separation. Additionally, it will provide a substantive theory for understanding the process of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive partner based on the experience of the participants in this study.

Overview

The objective of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the process involved when women sustain the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The thesis report is structured in five chapters. In chapter one, the significance of the problem, purpose of the study, specific aims, key terms, reasons for interest in the research topic, and significance of the study have been presented. Chapter two is comprised of a review of the substantive literature relating to abused women. Chapter three presents a description and rationale for the research method utilized in this study. This chapter includes a detailed discussion regarding theoretical sampling, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Chapter four presents the findings of the study. The process experienced by women who are sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship is described. The identified process consists of four phases and is conceptualized as a non-linear model. Chapter five outlines the theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship and compares the current theory with existing

literature. The thesis report is concluded with counselling implications, limitations of the

study, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to partner abuse. Firstly, background information will be outlined in the following areas: incidence and prevalence, abuse in various relationships, emotional abuse, effects of partner abuse, and support. Further, existing studies will be presented on women who stay in abusive relationships, the process of leaving an abusive relationship, and the process of sustaining the separation.

Partner abuse continues to be one of the most pervasive problems of our times. We have shifted from the stage of denial that it never occurs to recognizing that it is a severe and pernicious problem. There has been a discernable shift from viewing it as the responsibility of the victim to laying sole responsibility on the perpetrator. We have gone from interpreting it as a personal character deficiency to viewing it as a type of behavior that is, at least to some degree, endorsed and mediated by culture. We have moved from only small scale experiential accounts to a combination of large scale efforts to measure the prevalence of abuse within entire nations while continuing to record the personal stories (Klein et al., 1997; Sev'er, 1997).

Incidence and Prevalence

We expect and are expected to love, nurture, and empower one another in our most intimate relationships. However, abuse and violent interaction patterns are normally accepted and thoroughly ingrained into the foundation of these intimate relationships (Tifft, 1993). The prevalence of battering, marital rape, and abuse indicates that abuse is, and has been, a fundamental and pervasive pattern of experience among couples (Tifft,

1993). It is much more probable to be victimized both emotionally and physically by an intimate family member than by a stranger (Straus & Smith, 1990).

In every neighborhood, there are women who are abused by their partners. Partner abuse is a problem that occurs across all geographic, religious, and economic lines. It spans all ages, lifestyles, races, and nationalities. In some couples, abuse is an isolated or occasional occurrence; however, in others it is a daily routine (Hofeller, 1982, 1983; MacLeod, 1980; NiCarthy, 1987).

The extensiveness of partner abuse and the gender inequalities of intimate violence, as well as its lethal potential, have been depicted in the National Family Violence Survey and the National Crime Victimization Survey (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). At least two million women are beaten by their partners each year and as many as half of all female homicide victims are killed by their husbands or boyfriends (Bachman & Saltzman, 1994; Kellerman & Mercy, 1992; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Those engaged in efforts to decrease and control partner abuse are principally concerned with how much abuse occurs in families, the severity of the abuse, and the nature of victim-offender relationships in families. Numerous studies have documented the severity and pervasiveness of abuse against intimate partners across various countries. However, the incidence rates range widely and investigators diverge in their opinions on suitable theoretical explanations, relevant risk factors, and the gender equivalence of abuse in intimate partner relationships. Inconsistencies in rates or severity across studies frequently reflect differences in methodology and study design, such as the time dimension during which the abuse is assessed, the population studied, or the method of interviewing or measuring of the abuse. Populations may diverge in the extent to which

they possess particular risk factors for abuse, such as youth, poverty, or family history (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

Due to differences in the definitions and the sampling procedures utilized, estimates of the incidence and prevalence of partner abuse fluctuate. It is apparent, however, that the incidence of partner abuse is not infrequent (Loue, 2001). Partner abuse is a pervasive social problem in Canada. Statistics Canada (1998) indicate the following:

- In 1996, 21,901 cases of spousal assault were recorded in a sample of 154 police departments across Canada.

- Between 1977 and 1996 there were 12,666 victims of homicide in Canada, one third involving victims and offenders who were related to each other by marriage, common-law union, or kinship. Of these victims, 1,525 wives were killed by their husbands (75% of all spousal homicides).

- 29% of ever-married women experience domestic assault.

More recently, the 1999 General Social Survey, which was the first effort by Statistics Canada to measure spousal violence through comprehensive questions on a traditional victimization survey, depicted the following (Statistics Canada, 2000):

- An estimated 8% of women who were married or living in a common-law relationship throughout the previous five-year period experienced some kind of violence committed by their partner on at least one occasion. This amounts to approximately 690,000 women.

- Younger women, and couples in common-law unions, were at the greatest risk of begin assaulted by a spouse or partner.

▪25% of women who experienced violence reported having been beaten on at least one occasion during the five years prior to the survey.

▪20% of women experiencing spousal violence reported having been sexually assaulted and approximately 13% of women who experienced spousal violence reported having had a gun or knife used against them, or having faced the threat of it.

▪Approximately 40% of women in violent unions reported experiencing some form of physical injury and 15% of women said they required medical attention as a result of the violence.

▪38% of women in violent unions said the abuse or threat of abuse was so severe that they feared for their lives.

▪Provincial rates of spousal violence against women ranged from 4% in Newfoundland to 11% in Alberta, and the highest being at 12% in Prince Edward Island.

▪Five-year rates of violence in current marriages were 10 times higher for women who reported emotional abuse compared with those who did not.

<div align="center">Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships</div>

Lesbian battering has been defined as "a pattern of violence (or) coercive behaviors whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control" (Hart, 1986, p. 174). Although researchers have been investigating partner abuse for over 20 years (Straus et al., 1980) there is an apparent lack of research on abuse among same-sex couples (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Loue, 2001). However, the available research

indicates that partner abuse among gays and lesbians appears to be as prevalent as it is among heterosexuals (Renzetti, 1997).

Partner Abuse Among Ethnic Minorities

Partner abuse is a serious social problem that affects many segments of society (Straus et al., 1980). Although there has been an increased focus on abuse, researchers are just starting to explore the complexities of partner abuse among ethnic minorities (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Sorenson, 1996). This gap in the literature has existed for many reasons. First, some researchers have taken a "color blind" approach to investigating partner abuse. It has been assumed that the dynamics of battering were comparable regardless of ethnicity (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). Although abusive couples of all ethnic backgrounds may share some similarities (e.g., high rates of marital dissatisfaction), a color-blind perspective disregards the ways race/ethnicity shapes the experience and interpretation of abuse (O'Keefe, 1994). Alternatively, other researchers have considered abuse to be a problem mainly of poor, ethnic minorities. As a consequence, research findings have been presented without consideration for factors that may act as mediators between ethnicity and partner abuse (e.g., level of acculturation) or structural inequalities (e.g., social class) that might account for higher rates of partner abuse among ethnic minorities (Asbury, 1993; Cazenave & Straus, 1990). Additionally, failure to consider historic and sociocultural factors that influence minority partner abuse could result in stereotypes, unfair public policies, and ineffective intervention efforts (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

Partner Abuse in Dating Relationships

Dating abuse is the physical, psychological, or sexual abuse of one partner by the other in a dating relationship where the couple is not living together. In most cases, the abused partner is female and the abuse of women by men is more pervasive and usually more severe (Health Canada, 1996; Nixon, 2002). The dynamics and patterns of dating abuse are similar to partner abuse; power and control are the central issues (Health Canada, 1996; Nixon, 2002). Dating abuse is not a new social problem; however, it has only been recently acknowledged (Health Canada, 1996).

Dating abuse can occur at any age, although teens and women in their early twenties are most at risk (Health Canada, 1996). Similar to adult partner abuse, dating abuse occurs in a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and there are no visible patterns based on race, religion, or academic ability (Fitzpatrick & Halliday, 1992; Health Canada, 1996). This type of abuse can also occur between different sex or same sex couples (Nixon, 2002).

Young women in dating relationships seem to experience the same types of abuse that married or cohabitating women experience. Young women may experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from their partners. It was commonly thought that this sort of abuse was reserved for married or cohabiting couples, but research, particularly since the early 1980s, has established that young women are at risk for abuse from their dating partners (Fitzpatrick & Halliday, 1992).

Emotional Abuse

Almost without exception, abused women are subjected to varying forms of emotional abuse (Hofeller, 1983). Emotional, psychological, or verbal abuse is the most

complex form of abuse to recognize and is very detrimental to the partner being abused (Health Canada, 1996). The effects of the emotional abuse must not be underestimated; practically all abused women agree that this type of abuse is far more detrimental than any physical harm that they endured (Hofeller, 1983). As one woman stated in an interview with Hofeller (1983) "The bruises and cuts would always eventually heal; but the emotional scars never did. I carried them with me all the time." (p. 20).

Kirkwood (1993) found that recovering from the impact of emotional abuse was essential to women's experiences after they had left their relationships. She also found that of the women she interviewed, emotional abuse appeared to be a deeper and more central form of abuse, especially in relation to women's experiences of abuse and leaving their abuser.

Frequently, emotional and physical abuse are intimately associated. Emotional abuse may be used by the batterer to effectuate control during the interim periods, while occurrences of physical violence may take place only sporadically (Dutton & Golant, 1995).

<div align="center">Effects of Partner Abuse</div>

Practitioners and researchers in the last two decades have changed the meaning of an assault by a partner from a private family matter to a social problem. This shift happened mainly because of the influence of the evidence of negative psychological and social consequences that partner abuse has for victims and families. On an individual level, there are health and psychological effects (Dutton, 1993; Gleason, 1993; Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Orava et al., 1996; Walker, 1979). Families experience marital disruption and less satisfying and responsive marital and parental relationships (Giles-

Sims, 1983; Mahoney, 1991). The social community suffers from elevated costs for the criminal justice and mental health systems, lost work, lower worker productivity, and decreased educational and economic achievement for victims and family members (Browne, 1987; Miller et al., 1996; Straus & Gelles, 1986).

Health Effects

Partner abuse may well result in serious health consequences and a concomitant need for medical attention (Loue, 2001). Initial psychological responses to partner abuse frequently comprise of denial, confusion, shock, withdrawal, depression, numbing, and fear (Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992; Hilberman, 1980; Symonds, 1979; Walker, 1979). Long-term effects commonly include fear, fatigue, anxiety, feelings of loss, betrayal, or hopelessness, and sleeping and eating disturbances (Goodman et al., 1993; Herman, 1992; Walker, 1979).

Undoubtedly, the most severe consequence of partner violence is death (Loue, 2001). Research has found that of adult women who are murdered, the majority are killed by an intimate or former intimate partner. Of these, the majority have been previously battered before their death (Campbell, 1992).

Psychological Effects

The psychological effects of abuse as a traumatic experience encompass a wide range of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, interpersonal, and physiological responses. The psychological effects of abuse can be considered within three subcategories: (1) changes in cognition (e.g., cognitive schemas, negative beliefs about self, self-esteem, attributions, expectations, self-efficacy, perceptions), (2) indicators of psychological distress and/or dysfunction (e.g., anger, depression, avoidance responses, anxiety, sleep

difficulty, hypervigilance, suspiciousness, lowered self-esteem, morbid hatred, somatic

complaints, suicide, grief, depression, impaired functioning, fear, alcohol or drug abuse),

and (3) relational disturbances (e.g., fear of intimacy, difficulty trusting,

attachment/dependency, sexual difficulties) (Dutton, 1992).

Variation in Effects of Abuse

In virtually every woman, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse is sufficient

to generate negative effects; however, some women are more severely affected than

others. There is substantial variation in women's efforts to react to the abuse against

them. Several variables influence or mediate both psychological effects of abuse and the

abused woman's efforts to escape, avoid abuse, and protect herself and her children. The

following mediating factors are hypothesized to help elucidate differences in the

psychological effects of abuse among abused women, beyond that which appears to be

explained by knowing the nature and extent of the abuse itself: (1) tangible resources and

social support, (2) institutional response, (3) personal strengths/inner resources, (4) other

current stressors in addition to the abuse, (5) vulnerability factors, and (6) positive and

negative aspects of the relationship in which the abuse happens (Dutton, 1992).

Support

Social support has been defined in several ways. Primarily, social support is the

supposition that others can be relied upon for advice, information, guidance,

understanding, and support (Buunk & Hoorens, 1992). In addition, social support refers

to receiving support from others once stress occurs (Gottlieb, 1983). Both of these

definitions assume the preventive role of support against the negative effects of stress.

Theoretically, social support offers some buffer to the effects of abuse on psychological outcomes (Hoff, 1990). Substantial research indicates that social support reduces or buffers the adverse psychological impacts of exposure to stressful life events and ongoing life strains (Thoits, 1986). The necessity for both social support and personal coping strategies has profound implications for the successful resolution of crises around abuse (Hoff, 1990). Responses to the women from social support members reveal how support members' values either facilitate or impede abused women in getting appropriate outside services (Hoff, 1990). Social support can be provided by families, friends, social services, or other sources of help (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). It was found that practically any support or help source could assist women is "beating wife-beating" (Bowker, 1983a).

Women who have been abused by their partners may seek help in a range of arenas, including formal and informal supports (Loue, 2001). The response of those to whom a woman turns may be pivotal as to whether she decides to remain with or leave the abuser (Rhodes, 1998). Landenburger (1989) found that a lack of support from those whom the abused woman had sought help is one of the factors that contributed to a woman's response to abuse. The findings of the Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) study indicated that women's survival in abusive relationships can be greatly enhanced or threatened by helpers' interventions. Thus, social support and close relationships that facilitate the women during this process may be vital to the successful resolution of the abuse (Rose, 2000).

It is found that the majority of abused women speak to someone and request professional or community assistance; however, there has been little research completed

investigating the factors related to the decision to seek help or patterns of help seeking among abused women (Loue, 2001; Rhodes, 1998). Factors that have been identified to increase the probability that an abused woman will seek help include the severity and frequency of injury (Abel & Suh, 1987; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1977), a higher educational level (Abel & Suh, 1987), younger age (West, Kantor, & Jasinski, 1998) and a greater ability to use English (West, Kantor & Jasinski, 1998).

It is not only important for women to have support while leaving but also while sustaining the decision to leave the relationship. Women specify that although helper support during the initial leaving process is crucial, the struggle to sustain the separation requires even further support. In fact, poorly directed assistance during this struggle has potential for undoing the woman's hard won gains (Wuest, 1999).

After the final departure, there are many struggles women may endure, which may last many years. It is important for social support networks to continue to support these women. It may be detrimental to assume that once these women have overcome the struggle of leaving and the immediate aftermath, their struggles are over.

Women Who Stay in an Abusive Relationship

Why Do Women Stay?

A frequent question asked by the public is, "Why do women stay in abusive relationships?" This question implicitly proposes that victimization happens because something is wrong with abused women (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Mahoney, 1991). This question and related questions are frequently misunderstood as indicators that the abused woman is unwilling to do anything about protecting herself and her children, or worse that she "wants" to be abused. These interpretations fail to incorporate an

understanding of the abused woman's experience or her motivation for protecting and ensuring the survival of herself and her children in the abusive relationship (Dutton, 1992).

The appropriate question is not what the abused woman has done to end the abusive behavior, because this implies that she has the capability to end the abusive behavior and she may not; but rather what she has done to escape, avoid, or protect herself from it (Ganley, 1987). Abused women engage in a wide range of behaviors in responding to the abuse against them by their partners (Bowker, 1983b; Pagelow, 1982). These efforts to escape, avoid, and protect themselves and their children from constant violence, abuse, and control may comprise of legal strategies, seeking assistance from a range of sources, leaving, separating, and/or divorcing, and complying with and/or anticipating of the abuser's desires or wishes (Dutton, 1992).

Hoff (1990) asserts that when looking at the explanation of why a woman stays in abusive relationships one must take into account the possibility of dynamic interaction between the following four factors: (1) the woman's own reasoning process (i.e. how she makes sense out of her experience of violence), (2) the social-cultural roots of her reasoning process and self-concept, (3) the beliefs and first-hand accounts of persons in her social network, and (4) how these social-psychological factors might intersect with the political economy in the woman's social milieu.

Victim vs. Survivor

There is a debate in the literature regarding the terms 'victim' and 'survivor'. The abused woman has been previously characterized as a helpless and passive victim. Walker's (1979) theory of "learned helplessness" is depictive of the psychological focus

on the victim stereotype. Lenore Walker's book, *The Battered Woman* (1979), explained that the abused woman becomes "psychologically paralyzed" as a consequence of learned helplessness. The abused woman starts to feel that she has no control over her experience because she is uncertain of when the abuse will happen, as it is unpredictable. In the process, she then starts to blame herself for the abuse.

The established notion of learned helplessness comes from the extensive laboratory research of Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. His research was on dogs that were exposed to uncontrollable intermittent electric shocks. He discovered that the dogs learned to be 'helpless' overtime, and when subsequently provided with an opportunity to escape from the shock, remained in the painful situation. His research was steadily extended to a range of species and ultimately humans (Seligman, 1975).

An alternative explanation to the learned helplessness characterization of abused women is that they are active survivors, rather than helpless victims. A survivor hypothesis contradicts the assumptions of learned helplessness: "Battered women increase their help seeking in the face of increased violence, rather than decrease help seeking as learned helplessness would suggest" (Gondolf, 1988, p. 17). The underlying assumption is that women seek help in proportion to the awareness that they and their children are more and more in danger (Gondolf, 1988). "Their effort to survive transcends even fearsome danger, depression or guilt, and economic constraints. It supersedes the 'giving up and giving in' which occurs according to learned helplessness. In this effort to survive, battered women are, in fact, heroically assertive and persistent" (Gondolf, 1988, p. 18).

Additionally, NiCarthy (1987) constructed an image of women as survivors, rather than passive victims. Women, who left their abusive partners, not only had "survived" the abuse but also "survived" the aftermath of abuse, which may include depression, anxiety, or resurgence of romantic feelings for their partner as they made a transition into a new lifestyle. There is a lack of literature regarding how women cope with these struggles, but NiCarthy proposes that the most successful women have formulated complex and skilled methods of psychologically coping. Their survival is an active, progressive effort.

Decision to Leave the Abusive Relationship

Leaving has been explained as a process, rather than a single event. It is a process that involves movement into and out of the abusive relationship. Leaving an abusive relationship in not a simple resolution but a complex ongoing process of changes and decisions in all aspects of daily life (Landenburger, 1989; Limandri, 1987; Lockley, 1999; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Pilkington, 2000; Ulrich, 1991, 1993). Researchers, therapists, and shelter workers have all suggested that it is common for an abused woman to attempt to leave her abuser several times before the relationship is permanently ended (Felder & Victor, 1996; Lockley, 1999; Martin et al., 2000; Sullivan & Davidson, 1991). It has been found that the average abused woman leaves her partner eight times prior to leaving permanently (Felder & Victor, 1996; Lockley, 1999). Thus, leaving as a process requires the understanding that interventions aimed at support for women are not wasted, despite the fact that several women may leave and return to the relationship numerous times before finally leaving for good (Ulrich, 1991).

Deciding to leave an abusive relationship is a complex process and the circumstances and events leading to that decision are unique for each woman (Hoff, 1990). Additionally, decision-making also fluctuates according to women's social circumstances and to their own resources. Thus, women make decisions and change their minds on the basis of social and material conditions (e.g., need to support children, availability of housing), and values (e.g., belief in responsibility for making a relationship work) that vary for all of the women (Hoff, 1990).

Several factors have been identified as being conducive to leaving an abusive relationship. These factors include the availability of support services (Snyder & Scheer, 1981), the availability of economic support (Pfouts, 1978; Strube & Barbour, 1984), previous separations (Snyder & Scheer, 1981), and concerns for one's own safety and personal growth (Ulrich, 1991). Numerous other factors have been found to inhibit the decision to leave. These include religious traditions (Ulrich, 1993), potential economic hardship (Godolf et al., 1988), and love (Strube & Barbour, 1984).

Leaving Does Not Assure Safety

Although leaving an abusive relationship is frequently important in a woman's efforts to increase her own safety, there is no assurance that she will be safe simply because she no longer lives with her abuser or is divorced from him (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Steinman, 1991). In actuality, the woman's leaving may be directly associated with an escalation of violence even to the point of lethality (Berk, Newton & Berk, 1986; Browne, 1987; Dutton-Douglas & Dionne, 1991; Kelly, 1996).

Thus, the cost and losses of leaving for women are enormous, and many realistically evaluate the negative impacts on them and their children and either never

leave or leave and return home (Kelly, 1996). In some communities, leaving an abusive partner may result in further losses. This may include the woman's loss of the community, home and friends, and/or custody of her children. The loss of community as an outcome of seeking to end abuse has been identified as an important factor in many women's decision-making process. Women in these circumstances can be so threatened, by both their abuser and the implications of leaving, that they are reluctant to reach out for help (Kelly, 1996).

Research has begun to uncover processes associated with leaving abusive relationships (Campbell et al., 1998; Landenburger, 1989, 1993; Lempert, 1996; Martin et al., 2000; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Mills, 1985; Newman, 1993; Pilkington, 2000; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984; Ulrich, 1991, 1993). A brief review of the relevant studies is provided below in chronological order.

Relevant Studies

Strube & Barbour (1983) conducted a quantitative study of 98 women who were in, or who had been in, an intimate, sexual, live-in relationship with their abuser. The researchers discovered that economic dependence was a significant factor in the decisions by abused women to leave or remain in their abusive relationship, indicating that women who were employed were more likely than unemployed women to leave a violent partner. In addition, it was found that commitment was also significantly related to decisions to leave an abusive relationship. That is, the longer the relationship had existed the more likely a woman was to remain in that violent relationship.

In a follow-up study, Strube & Barbour (1984) conducted a quantitative study with 251 women. They compared results from those who had decided to leave an abusive

relationship with those who had decided to stay with their partner. They attempted to replicate the results of their 1983 study and examine additional factors related to the decision to leave or remain in an abusive relationship. The findings indicated that women who left the relationship were employed, non-white, and in the relationship a shorter period of time. Those who stayed indicated they did so because of love, economic hardship, dependence, and the belief that the abuser would change.

Unfortunately, in Strube & Barbour's 1983 study and 1984 follow-up study, there was no opportunity to discover how some women decide to leave in spite of economic hardship and unemployment. While the results of the survey did identify some significant factors, the exclusion of the question as to why the women left leaves a large gap in the data and reveals the need for qualitative, exploratory research on this topic.

Mills (1985) interviewed 10 shelter residents who had left their physically abusive relationship. Issues concerning women's feelings and thoughts regarding the violence, themselves, and their husbands were investigated. From the interviews a pattern of changes or stages emerged that women shared in their relationships with their husbands. The pattern encompassed the five following stages: (1) entering the relationship, (2) managing the violence, (3) experiencing a loss of self, (4) re-evaluating the relationship, and (5) restructuring the self. These were described as stages of coping during the process of victimization.

NiCarthy (1987) conducted qualitative research with 41 women who had left abusive partners for more than one year prior to their interview. The study provided data in the form of profiles of women, along with an analysis of some of the women's similarities in experiences. As well, it included a discussion of the most frequent reasons

for breaking away from the relationship, and the aspects of the their lives which enabled them to leave. NiCarthy stressed that there is usually no single cause for leaving. It is more frequently a chain of events, or a process, which entails women moving their way toward the decision to leave, over a number of years. Common reasons for leaving included fear of staying, loss of hope for change, hitting rock bottom, hope for a better life without the abuser, positive external resources, events beyond the woman's control, and tipping the scales of hope and fear.

Landenburger (1989) used a triangulated design that included both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. She studied 30 women who were currently in or who had previously been in an abusive relationship. The women were recruited from a community support group, a shelter, and from a newspaper ad. The purpose of the study was to describe the experience of being abused within the context of a significant relationship and to explain how the nature of the relationship influences the choices a woman makes over time.

A four-phase process describing entrapment in and recovery from an abusive relationship resulted from the analysis of the qualitative data. The four-phase process that was generated was binding, enduring, disengaging, and recovering. The "binding" phase emerged at the beginning of the abusive relationship and included a desire for a loving relationship, recognition of warning signs, working on the relationship, and questioning the relationship. The next phase, "enduring," occured when the woman felt that she was responsible for the abuse. She was placating, covering for the abuser, and was experiencing a lessening of herself. The next phase, "disengaging," occured when the woman started to identify with other women in an abusive situation. She labeled the

abuse as abnormal and sought help. Tension escalated in this phase as the abuser attempted to keep the woman in the relationship. The last phase is "recovery" and involved struggling for survival, and grieving for the lost relationship, especially if children were involved. Grieving included missing the good aspects of the relationship and searching for meaning. This four-phase process elucidated the intra- and interpersonal processes involved when women are living in, preparing to leave, and leaving abusive relationships.

Hoff (1990) conducted a collaborative study with 9 battered women, 131 members of their social network, and 3 additional battered women who acted as methodological consultants. She investigated the women's survival tactics, why they stayed and eventually left the relationship, and the importance of their external social supports in the decision to leave. Hoff addressed the social context, connecting the personal and the political, and examining the relationship between personal crises and the traditional attitudes toward women, marriage, family, and violence. Her study redirected attention away from victim blaming and pathologizing of abused women and focused on viewing women as survivors who manage multiple crises despite public neglect of their situation. Hoff exposed some important dimensions in the process of leaving an abusive relationship and identified the complexity of the task.

Ulrich (1991) interviewed 51 previously abused women to discover the reasons for leaving physically abusive partners. The women were recruited from crisis centers, support groups, therapist offices, and community newsletters. The women named 86 reasons or justifications for leaving the abusive relationship. It was discovered that personal growth was a significant reason for leaving, as was safety. Ulrich found that

leaving was a process that takes place over time, and called for additional research aimed at understanding leaving as a process and the supports necessary to facilitate that process.

Using grounded theory methodology, Newman (1993) collected data by observing and interviewing battered women. The core concept that emerged from the data was "giving up" and implied that it was not easy for these women to start new lives on their own. Disinterest of helpers and difficulty getting essential financial assistance, a safe place to live, and suitable counselling were structural factors that contributed to women feeling revictimized, giving up, and returning to the relationship.

In a feminist, grounded theory study, Merritt-Gray & Wuest (1995) interviewed rural survivors of abusive relationships to discover a substantive theory to explain the process of leaving. They focused on the process of counteracting abuse and breaking free, the initial stages in the process of reclaiming self. Their findings highlighted, contrary to much of the existing literature, that the abused women were not passive victims. From the start, the women counteracted abuse by relinquishing parts of self, minimizing abuse, and fortifying their defenses. The work of counteracting abuse prepared the woman for testing the exits in the process of breaking free. This finding is also supported by Campbell et al. (1994) who found that battered women seen in shelters and health care settings are often strong, creative, and assertive in contrast to the impression of passivity and psychological pathology given by much of the popular and scholarly literature on abuse.

Campbell et al. (1998) conducted interviews with an ethnically and economically heterogeneous urban community sample of women who were self-identified as having a serious problem in an intimate relationship. The inclusion criteria of battering were

repeated physical and/or sexual assault within a context of coercive control. These 31 women were interviewed three times over two and a half years. Feminist action research was utilized, combining interview and measurement instruments. The study attempted to address gaps in the literature by interviewing primarily African American women. A process of achieving nonviolence was identified for the majority of the women. However, relationship status did not necessarily correspond to abuse status and there was sustained violence subsequent to leaving the relationship. The identified themes included: active problem solving, including conscious decisions to "make do" in a relationship and/or subordinate the self; responding to identifiable pivotal events; and a negotiating process first with the self and then, directly and/or indirectly, with the male partner.

Pilkington (2000) employed a phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology to investigate 8 women's experiences of persisting while wanting to change. The generated structure and central finding contained three core concepts: wavering in abiding with the burdensome-cherished, engaging-distancing with ameliorating intentions, and anticipating the possibilities of the new. The first core concept, wavering in abiding with the burdensome-cherished, identified a continuing struggle of confirming and disconfirming the priority of persisting over changing. The second core concept, engaging-distancing with ameliorating intentions, specified a pattern of moving with and apart from oneself and one's world while attempting to ease one's discomfort and strive for an enhanced life. The third core concept, anticipating the possibilities of the new, signified the process of considering the potential in, and ambiguous consequences of, choices.

Martin et al. (2000) interviewed 70 female residents of an urban domestic violence shelter to examine a series of hypotheses regarding two factors pertinent to the process of leaving an abusive relationship: risk assessments and decision certainty. Their results offered support for the hypothesis that battered women's expectancies for permanently ending their abusive relationships are biased by unrealistic optimism, which is a pattern with important implications for those who work with victims of domestic violence. The findings further suggested that unrealistically optimistic risk assessment may be particularly prominent among battered women who express high certainty about their decision to leave the abusive relationship.

Summary

The studies described above explore or examine women's decisions to leave abusive relationships. There are some important findings reported which identify themes and aspects of the process. However, while the literature regarding the process of leaving an abusive relationship addressed the immediate aftermath of leaving, little attention has been given to the process that women experience while sustaining the separation. Although this literature has addressed factors influencing women's decisions to leave and attempts to explain the process of leaving, it is necessary to understand how women sustain that decision over time. The next section explicates beginning research on this process.

Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship

Formerly abused women face a number of emotional, material, and social problems after they have left their abuser. These consist of their process of healing from and coping with the lasting emotional impact of abuse (Kirkwood, 1993; Lockley, 1999).

Kirkwood (1993) found that recovering from the impact of emotional abuse was essential to women's experiences after they had left their relationship. Additionally, the women that Kirkwood (1993) interviewed faced material problems in maintaining independence and negative responses from and beliefs held by others about their experience of abuse. "Women's subjective experiences of these problems, which often compound and reinforce the emotional issues they face, reveal that leaving an abuser is a process which is achieved through many different strategies, extending far past the ending of a relationship with an abuser" (Kirkwood, 1993, p. 1).

A complete understanding of the conditions of each woman's decision to stay away from her abusive partner can only be seen in the context of her life. The literature regarding how women dealt with the numerous problems they faced after they left abusive partners, and how they maintain the courage to remain safe and free, is limited (NiCarthy, 1987). Thus, while the initial processes of leaving an abusive relationship have been well researched, there is a lack of research examining the process subsequent to leaving such a relationship. Two studies that have begun to look at this process are a study by Kirkwood (1993) and a study by Wuest (1999).

Kirkwood (1993) conducted unstructured interviews with 30 women who had left their abuser over a year or more ago. She wanted to access in-depth information regarding the complexity of and interaction between women's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and actions subsequent to leaving abusers. She described a process of survival and personal change that women experience following leaving an abusive relationship. The interrelationships of emotional and practical struggles as well as structural obstacles were stressed. The study found that when reclaiming power and leaving an abuser,

women expressed feelings of anger and fear. These feelings served as resources for the women as they were able to move a greater distance outward and, ultimately, break free from the abuse. Furthermore, the women spoke of four major areas of basic needs: obtaining housing, financial support, medical advice or attention, and physical and emotional safety.

In a feminist grounded study of rural survivors, Wuest (1999) focused on the process of not going back to the abusive relationship. The requirements for moving forward into the stage of not going back were feeling some measure of safety, wanting to take more control, having a semipermanent place to live, and having help. The process of not going back involved two subprocesses: claiming and maintaining territory and relentless justifying. Claiming and maintaining territory was the process of establishing and maintaining a safe place of one's own. It involved two strategic processes of gaining control and getting situated. It was found that relentless justifying was essential in the stage of not going back. It entailed the torturous process of repeatedly explaining one's situation not only to the outside world, but also to one's self.

Summary

Both studies began to delineate the process women experienced subsequent to leaving an abusive relationship. Additional research is required in this area to substantiate these existing studies. Therefore, the current study will add to the limited research completed in this area. The current study differs from the above two studies in the following ways. Firstly, although Kirkwood (1993) conducted unstructured interviews, she used a topic guide for the interviews that was extensive. Therefore, the women's stories were guided by the focus of the questions that Kirkwood believed were relevant.

The current study conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide that was broad. This allowed the women to tell their own stories and focus on what they believed was important in the process of sustaining the decision. Secondly, Wuest (1995) conducted a grounded theory study by interviewing women who lived in rural areas, whereas this study interviewed women who lived in the city of Calgary, an urban area.

Complexities of an Abusive Relationship

The literature that has been presented has focused on abuse committed against women by their intimate partners. However, it should be noted that there are numerous complexities involved in an abusive relationship. When abuse occurs within a relationship there are several factors that have to be looked at including, the interpersonal context, traditional sex-role and gender expectations, relationship dynamics, family context, religion, and community affiliation (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Loue, 2001; Tifft, 1993).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the literature on partner abuse. Additionally, the chapter presented research on the three following areas: women who stay in abusive relationships, women who decide to leave abusive relationships, and women who sustain the separation.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD OF INQUIRY

The grounded theory method as described by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998), Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used in this study to discover the process involved for women in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The chapter describes the research design, a rationale for its use, a description of the method, theoretical sampling, data collection, and data analysis, as well as measures that were taken to enhance trustworthiness and compliances with ethical standards.

Research Design

Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that was collaboratively developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is based on the systematic generating of theory from data that is acquired from social research (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1992, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The grounded theory method, with its aim to develop explanatory theory regarding common social life patterns, has emerged from the social psychological theory of symbolic interactionism (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

Symbolic interactionism centers on the meanings that people attribute to events through interaction or experience. Socially derived meanings that facilitate functioning of families and groups are repeatedly being modified in social interactions and changing social structures. Therefore, the symbolic interactionist perspective is dynamic and processual rather than static and structural (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

Grounded theory is a method of uncovering the basic social and structural processes of a situation at both the symbolic and interactional levels (Chenitz &

Swanson, 1986). "The researcher needs to understand behavior as the participants understand it, learn about their world, learn their interpretation of self in the interaction, and share their definitions" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p.7). Thus, the researcher must be both a participant in their world and understand the world from the participants' perspective (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

The goal of the grounded theory method is to derive theoretical explanations of reality by generating concepts and relationships between those concepts, which emerge and are interpreted from the data collected about the phenomenon. Grounded theory is based on the assumption that human behavior can be viewed as a social process. That is, human beings are in constant interaction with each other in their environment. Furthermore, the world is dynamic, changing, and evolving, with individual human beings inevitably evolving through their experiences with the world (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Strengths of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is valuable in several regards. Firstly, grounded theory methods are not bound by either discipline or data collection. Thus, people in many disciplines can use grounded theory successfully, for it is a general methodology. Furthermore, no single kind of data on a category or technique for data is necessarily appropriate. As a result, the researcher is able to use various techniques that provide different views or vantage points from which to comprehend a category and to develop its properties (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Secondly, a grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. The theory is derived from the data, systematically

gathered and analyzed through the research process. Therefore, it is likely to provide insight, enhanced understanding, and offer a meaningful guide to action. Additionally, a researcher does not commence a project with a preconceived idea and then force it on the data for the purpose of verification. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and permits theory to evolve from the data. Thus, the grounded theorist has no preconception of what should be in advance of its emergence. Therefore, grounded theory has the purpose of generating concepts and their relationships that explain, account for, and interpret the variation in behavior in the substantive area under study. A systematic set of procedures is used to develop the inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Glaser, 1992; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

Thirdly, generating theory by the systematic collection and analysis of data is an extremely powerful way to bring concepts of reality to a substantive area, both to others and participants in the area itself. It gives conceptual grasp by accounting for and interpreting substantive patterns of action, which offer both a feeling of control and understanding, and an access for action and modicum changes (Glaser, 1992).

Fourthly, grounded theory meets the two main criteria of good scientific inducted theory: parsimony and scope. It accounts for as much variation in behavior in the action scene with as few categories and properties as possible. The creativity necessary in achieving this excellence is the capability to break out of order, non-applicable, and received concepts, as well as to let novel categories and properties emerge through constant comparisons of incidents and concepts and to appropriately name them so others will feel their grab (Glaser, 1992).

Lastly, grounded theory is trustworthy. When a grounded theory has met the criteria of fit, relevance, work, and modifiability, trustworthiness will be produced. It is very critical to be able to trust one's theory, and grounded theory's rigorous methodology can produce this trustworthiness (Glaser, 1992, 1998). A discussion of the above criteria will be provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

<center>Rationale for Using Grounded Theory</center>

The purpose of this study is to discover the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. This topic represents a complex social phenomenon, which is best explored through the use of qualitative research methods (Strauss, 1987; Swanson, 1986). Although quantitative research has been indispensable in establishing that partner abuse is prevalent, its main focus on information that can be counted and measured does not help us understand the context of partner abuse. It does not tell us about the complexities of feelings, conflicts, and thoughts that each woman experiences as she struggles to decide the greatest way to react to her situation (NiCarthy, 1987). A more qualitative approach is called for by Rosen and Bird (1996) who emphasize how it can capture the subjective experience of violence, relationship processes, and individual interpretations, which are valuable in the search for understanding, as well as effective intervention.

Grounded theory was chosen as the qualitative method most appropriate for this study for several reasons. Grounded theory allows for exploration of both subjective experience and the reciprocal influence of social structure. Further, this method is an appropriate one to use to examine the empirical social world in a direct, naturalistic way (Deniz, 1970; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additionally, the grounded theory method is

useful to conceptualize behavior in intricate situations and to comprehend emerging or unresolved social problems. Grounded theory makes maximum contributions and delineates information regarding a phenomenon in areas in which little research has been completed (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Thus, one of the predominant uses of grounded theory has been in preliminary, descriptive, and exploratory studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is therefore especially appropriate to contribute to theory generation in the area of sustaining the separation, as little is known about this topic and few theories exist to explain or predict the phenomenon.

Theoretical Sensitivity

The term 'theoretical sensitivity' is commonly associated with grounded theory. It refers to the researcher's knowledge, skill, insight, and understanding. It promotes the researcher's generation of categories and properties and increases the ability to relate them into hypotheses. Moreover, it allows the researcher to further integrate the hypotheses, according to emergent theoretical codes. Thus, it is theoretical sensitivity that permits a researcher to develop a theory that is grounded, integrated, and conceptually dense. The accomplishment of theoretical sensitivity will result in relevance, fit, and work, which are the criteria of grounded theory (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Sources of Theoretical Sensitivity

The researcher can develop theoretical sensitivity through a variety of sources. These sources include literature, professional experience, personal experience, and the analytic process.

Literature. Reading literature, such as theory, research, or documents can help a researcher develop theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss & Corbin (1990) state: "By having some familiarity with these publications, you have a rich background of information that 'sensitizes' you to what is going on with the phenomenon you are studying" (p. 42).

Glaser (1992), however, states that in grounded theory research, the dictum is that there is no need to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study. This dictum is put forth by the concern not to contaminate, inhibit, be constrained by, or otherwise impede the researcher's effort to generate categories, their properties, and theoretical codes (Glaser, 1992). As such, Glaser (1992) suggests that the literature review in the related area begins only after the development of the emerging theory. This step enables the researcher to focus on the discovery process and to avoid the influence of preconceived or preempting concepts.

At the beginning of my research, it was necessary for me to read some of the literature in this area in order to determine that there was a need for further research. However, after I became aware that there was a need, I stopped reading the literature and began interviewing participants. I did not return to the literature until I had developed an emerging theory so I would not become influenced by the literature. Subsequent to the development of an emerging theory, I went back to the literature and completed an extensive review of the literature in the area of research.

Professional experience. This is another source of theoretical sensitivity, which is knowledge obtained through working in a particular field. This may assist the researcher in understanding actions and events that are heard or observed during the research study

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, there is a caution as Strauss and Corbin (1990) state: "The more professional experience, the richer the knowledge base and insight available to draw upon in the research. On the other hand, this kind of experience can also block you from seeing things that have become routine or obvious" (p. 42).

As previously mentioned, I had the opportunity to work in a women's shelter counselling women who had left an abusive relationship. My professional experience at the shelter was limited in that I only worked on a casual basis and for a short period of time. However, I did acquire a deeper level of understanding regarding the process involved in leaving an abusive relationship and the struggles faced by some of these women.

Personal experience. Personal experience is another source of sensitivity. This may provide the researcher with a basis for making comparisons that may assist in the stimulation and generation of potentially relevant concepts and the relationships of the concepts in regard to the research area. However, one must be cautious not to make the assumption that the experience of others is similar to one's own. Thus, the researcher must be open to the unique experiences of others (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

I have not had any personal experiences in the area of abusive relationships. I have an Aunt who left an abusive relationship and is currently in the process of sustaining that separation. I have witnessed the process she has endured these last seven months, while sustaining the decision to leave her abusive partner.

Analytic process. The process of analyzing the data offers a further source of theoretical sensitivity. As a researcher interacts with the data, understanding and insight about the phenomenon of study may increase. This increase in understanding and insight

will come from the following: collecting data, asking questions about the data, making comparisons, thinking about what one is seeing, making hypotheses, and developing small theoretical frameworks concerning concepts and their relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Creativity

While grounding concepts in data is the main element of this method, creativity of the researcher is also an important component (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Creativity manifests itself in the aptitude of the researcher to appropriately name categories, to make the free associations that are necessary for generating stimulating questions, and for coming up with the comparisons that lead to discovery. Creativity is essential in developing an effective theory, but the researcher should always validate any categories and statements of relationships arrived at creatively through the total research process (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the researcher jointly collects, codes, and analyzes the data. The researcher then decides what data to collect next and where to find the data, in order to develop theory as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling is completed in order to discover categories and their properties, and to propose interrelationships into a theory (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), theoretical sampling refers to sampling concepts relevant to the developing theory. More specifically, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state the following, "the aim of theoretical sampling is to sample events, incidents, and so forth, that are indicative of

categories, their properties, and dimensions, so that you can develop and conceptually relate them" (p.177).

The general procedure of theoretical sampling is to elicit codes from raw data from the beginning of data collection through constant comparative analysis. These codes are then used to direct further data collection. The codes are further theoretically developed with regards to their various properties and connections with other codes, until saturated. Theoretical sampling on any code ceases when it is saturated, elaborated, and integrated into the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical Saturation

The criterion for deciding when to discontinue sampling the different groups applicable to a category is the theoretical saturation of the category. Saturation means that no further data are being found whereby the researcher can develop the properties of the category. Theoretical saturation may be reached by joint collection and analysis of data. When one category is saturated, nothing remains; therefore, the researcher must go on to new groups for data on other categories. A sufficient theoretical sample is judged on the criteria of how widely and diversely the researcher chose the groups for saturating categories according to the type of theory one desired to develop (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Core theoretical categories are those with the most explanatory power. They must be saturated as entirely as possible. Attempts to saturate less relevant categories should not be made at the expense for saturating the core categories. The researcher learns which categories necessitate the most and least complete saturation and which ones can be dropped, as one's theory develops and becomes integrated. Consequently, the theory

generates its own selectivity for its direction and depth of development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Temporal Aspects of Theoretical Sampling

The temporal aspect of the research when generating grounded theory is through joint theoretical collection, coding, and analysis of data. This is dissimilar from research methods where separate periods of work are designated for each aspect. Research designed to discover theory requires that all three procedures go on simultaneously to the fullest degree possible. This is the fundamental process when generating grounded theory. It is impossible to engage in theoretical sampling without coding and analyzing simultaneously (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Selection of Participants

Participants for this study were recruited by word of mouth, through posters placed across the University of Calgary campus, and at various supportive agencies in the community. The posters utilized in the recruitment elucidated that participants should be women over the age of 18 who have left an abusive relationship for 12 months or longer (Appendix A). Those who were interested in participating were able to contact me either by telephone or by email, provided on each poster.

Criteria

I placed three criteria on the women I sought for participation: they must be eighteen years of age or older, must have been abused by a partner with whom they shared an intimate relationship, and that the relationship had been over for twelve months or longer at the time of the interview. The requirement of twelve months or longer was based on Kirkwood's 1993 study. Kirkwood found that the requirement of twelve months

allowed her to talk to women who were well established in their independence and less preoccupied with the practical aspects of leaving and the immediate aftermath. Twelve months was found to be a sufficient time to allow for retrospection and personal exploration (Kirkwood, 1993).

I did not define the term "abuse," which consequently allowed each woman to define abuse as it related to her. Thus, the study was not limited to women who endured physical abuse. Several services and studies have shown that women can be severely terrorized and abused without the use of physical violence by their partners (Kirkwood, 1993).

A number of women contacted me and expressed interest in the study. Those interested in participating were sent an information letter (Appendix B) explaining the study in greater detail. Subsequent to receiving the letter of information, seven women expressed a continued interest in the study. These women were then assessed through an initial telephone call. I was looking for the qualities of a "good" participant, specified by Morse (1991), which is someone who: "has undergone or is undergoing the experience..., is able to reflect and provide detailed experiential information about the phenomenon..., [has the] willingness to share the experience..., [and has] sufficient patience and tolerance to explain" (p. 132). Each of the women who expressed continued interest met the qualities of a good participant.

Interviews were arranged with each of these participants. Interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the participant. Five interviews were conducted at the University of Calgary and the remaining two were conducted at the participant's work

place. The selection of participants and interviewing took place from September 2002

through to April 2003. Below is a table containing participant demographics.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status While in the Relationship	Children	Length of Time In Relationship	Length of Time Out of Relationship
Betty	48	Caucasian	Married	1	10 years	2 years & 8 months
Michelle	44	Caucasian	Dating	0	4 years	3 years
Zelda	35	Caucasian	Common-law	0	13 years	4 years
Jane	41	Jamaican	Married	1	4 years	7 years
Living	29	Native (Cree)	Married Dating	0 0	1 year 1.5 years	3 Years 2 Years
Elizabeth	22	Caucasian	Married	1	2 years	14 months
Crystal	42	Caucasian	Married	2	10 years	3 years

Data Collection

The Interview Process

The interview is one of the primary types of data collection used in grounded

theory studies (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In this study, I wanted to access in-depth

information regarding the women's experience, while sustaining the separation. The type

of interview I selected for the first interview was the guided or semi-structured interview,

which Rogers and Bouey (1996) say is "particularly appropriate when you want to

compare information between and among people while at the same time you wish to

more fully understand each person's experience" (p. 56). During this type of interview,

the researcher loosely adheres to "an interview guide containing a set of brief, general questions, a topical outline, or a major theme" (Swanson, 1986, p. 67).

This interview format allowed the participants to describe their experience of sustaining the separation more freely than they might in response to structured questions. The natural style of the semi-structured interview also allowed the researcher to engage with participants, to get to know the participants as people, and understand how they see their world. When the researcher engages with participants in this manner, each interview becomes highly individualized and to a certain extent, participants are encouraged to change or introduce new topics (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Strauss, 1967).

First Interview

At the beginning of the first interview, each participant was given two copies of a consent form (Appendix C) to review and sign. Each participant kept a copy and I kept a copy. For confidentiality purposes, each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym. Subsequently, each participant was asked the following open question "Tell me about your decision to leave the abusive relationship you were in?" (see Appendix D for the interview guide). The remainder of the interview was guided by the questions on the interview guide; however, in order to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the participants' experience, the interview guide was followed in a flexible manner. Any promising leads were pursued, comments made earlier in the interviews were re-explored, and a variety of probes were used. The first five interviews were conducted between the dates of September 19th and October 30th. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2 hours and 30 minutes. The interviews, on average, were 1 hour and thirty minutes.

Following the first interview, a transcription was completed and mailed to each participant for her review. The participant had the opportunity to read the transcript and to make any corrections or clarify any misinterpretations in the transcript. Only one of the participants had corrections and clarifications and a second interview, which was more structured and narrow in focus, was conducted with this participant. The remainder of the participants did not feel they had anything to add or adjust to the first transcription.

Second Interview

Following the completion of the interviewing process with the first five participants, a second meeting was arranged with four of the participants and the emerging theory was presented. I requested feedback from the participants in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the developing theory. I received feedback and made notes to record any necessary corrections to the categories and theory. One of the participants was unable to meet in person, so the emerging theory was sent to her and I received feedback on the telephone and via email.

Remaining Interviews

After the first five participants had an opportunity to review the emerging theory I interviewed the final two participants. These interviews were conducted between the dates of March 5th and March 20th. These participants were selected because they were different from the previous participants. For instance, Elizabeth was much younger than the women I previously had interviewed and had left the abusive relationship only fourteen months ago. Therefore, I was trying to find participants who differed from those previous in order to see if the emerging theory held for these participants. Second

interviews were conducted with these two participants in order to ensure the

trustworthiness of the developing theory.

Data Transcription

With the permission of the participants, each interview was audio taped.

Following each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings. This permitted me to

constantly compare each interview throughout the research process, which is requisite

when using the grounded theory method.

After each interview was transcribed, a copy was sent to my supervisor to review.

This reviewing process helped me to monitor the interviewing and provided me with

feedback regarding my interviewing style. Modifications in my interviewing style were

made following feedback from the first interview I conducted.

One copy of the transcript was stored on a computer disk and one copy was

printed. Both were stored in my home filing cabinet. The audiotapes were also stored in a

home filing cabinet, which was kept locked at all times, accessible only to the researcher.

Data Analysis

In grounded theory method, data analysis consists of coding. This is the process

of breaking down the data from interviews and observations, generating concepts and

categories from those data, and reassembling the categories back together as they relate to

each other in the form of theory. Analysis and data collection are not undertaken as

separate, discrete activities by the researcher. Rather data collection, coding, and

theoretical sampling occur simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The coding procedures delineated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were utilized to

analyze the data. "Coding represents the operations by which data are broken down,

conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. It is the central process by which theories are built from data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.57). The analytic coding procedures discussed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 57) are intended to:

1. Build rather than only test theory.

2. Give the research process the rigor necessary to make the theory "good" science.

3. Help the analyst to break through the biases and assumptions brought to, and that can develop during, the research process.

4. Provide the grounding, build the density, and develop the sensitivity and integration needed to generate a rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents.

Coding

Analysis in grounded theory is comprised of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. It is important to note that the different types do not necessarily take place in stages. Frequently, a researcher in a single coding session may move between one form of coding to another, particularly between open and axial coding. The following is a description of the three different types of coding.

Open coding. The objective of the researcher is to generate an emergent set of categories and their properties, which fit, work, and are relevant for integration into a theory. To accomplish this objective the researcher starts with open coding, which is coding the data in every possible way. Therefore, open coding is the first step of theoretical analysis that pertains to the initial discovery of categories and their properties (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998).

Throughout open coding, the data are broken down into incidents, in order to be intimately examined and compared for similarities and differences, while continually asking of the data the neutral question "What category or property of a category does this incident indicate?" This particular question and open coding are the fundamental grounding approaches to the data and lead to emergent discoveries (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The coding process involves two basic analytic procedures. The first procedure pertains to the making of constant comparisons from incident to incident. Then, when concepts emerge, incident to concept, which generates the properties of categories. The second is asking the neutral, coding question referred to above, "What category or property of a category does this incident indicate?" When used carefully without preconception, these two procedures yield the initial categories and properties in open coding (Glaser, 1992; Green, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In preparation for the open coding process, I double spaced the transcripts and allowed wide right hand margins in order for the code words to be noted. In addition, extra copies of the transcripts were made to allow for the maximum number of codes to be assigned to any one particular statement or series of statements, to ensure full theoretical coverage.

I began open coding by breaking the data down into concepts, which are the basic units of analysis. This was completed through line-by-line analysis of the data. Strauss & Corbin (1990) note that line-by-line analysis is the most detailed type of analysis, but it is also the most generative. Additionally, line-by-line analysis is recommended to beginners learning to utilize this coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, I wrote

initial names for concepts directly onto the margins of the transcripts. Subsequently, all identified concepts were cut from the transcripts and pasted on to labeled index cards. The index card contained the statement, numerical number symbolizing the participant, and page number that the statement was cut from. As part of my effort to remain grounded in the data, I used the words of the participants as often as possible, thus creating in vivo codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

These concepts were then grouped into substantive codes, which reflected the substance of what the participants had said (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The substantive codes were organized with labeled envelopes. For example, any comment the participants made regarding gaining trust in themselves and growing more confident, was given the substantive code name "gaining self-esteem" and put into the same envelope.

The creation of these codes involves the use of constant comparison. Using this method, I assigned a code name to a given incident in the data and then compared each subsequent incident with the first incident. I then assigned to it either the same or a different code, depending on whether the characteristics were the same or different (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Next the substantive codes were compared, similar codes were clustered and labeled, and categories were developed. Conceptual names were then given to the categories. These names were more abstract than the names given to the concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, the substantive code of "gaining self-esteem" was grouped with other substantive codes that were associated to the consequences of leaving the relationship. Codes such as "feeling good," "believing in oneself," and "being confident with decision," were grouped under the category name "regaining control."

Subsequent to naming categories, I began developing the categories in terms of their properties, which were then dimensionalized. Properties are defined as attributes or characteristics of a category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). "Properties and dimensions are important to recognize and systematically develop because they form the basis for making relationships between categories and subcategories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 69). Thus, the identified properties of the category became the categories' sub-categories. For instance, the category "gaining awareness" had a property or sub-category was labeled "realization." A dimension of "realization" was the extent and degree to which the participant realized the negativity of her relationship. This category development formed the foundation for developing relationships between categories, subcategories, and major categories.

Axial coding. Axial coding involves a process whereby data are put back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories. Thus, in this coding process the researcher continues to be concerned with the development of a category, but development beyond properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

> In axial coding our focus is on specifying a category (phenomenon) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interactional strategies by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the consequences of those strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97).

The linking and development of categories occurs through asking of questions and the making of comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss & Corbin (1990) explicate that the actual process of axial coding involves the following four distinct analytical steps that are performed simultaneously.

1. Hypothetical relating of subcategories to a category by means of statements denoting the nature of the relationships between them and the phenomenon-casual conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies, consequences.

2. Verification of those hypotheses against actual data; the continued search for the properties of categories and subcategories.

3. Dimensional locations of data (events, happenings, etc.) indicative of them.

4. Beginning exploration of variation in phenomenon, by comparing each category and it subcategories for different patterns discovered by comparing dimensional locations of instances of data.

In order to link subcategories to their categories, I utilized the coding paradigm model, which involves conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, each of the categories was compared to the paradigm model and the best fit between the categories and the paradigm model was established. For instance, concerning the category "making a life of one's own," I asked myself whether it was a context, an intervening condition, a strategy carried out under a specific set of perceived conditions, or a consequence of strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I then returned to my data and sought evidence, incidents, and events that supported or refuted my question. Upon verification, I concluded that "making a life of one's own" was a strategy influenced by the condition of "focusing on self."

While continuing to search for evidence to support my questions and statements of relationships, and alternatives to these, I also continued to watch for evidence of other

properties of categories and the dimensional location of each incident that I coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For instance, with respect to the subcategory of "gathering information" I wanted to know what other properties exist in addition to the ones that were exposed during open coding. As I compared each incident, I wanted to know where each property could be dimensionally located. The goal is to aim for specificity, attempting to locate and specify each incident of data in terms of exact dimensional location. This gives the theory conceptual density and assists the researcher to uncover as much variation as possible (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Selective coding. Selective coding does not differ much from axial coding other than it is completed at a higher and more abstract level of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding is "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116).

The goal during this stage of coding is to integrate and systematically develop a theory that is conceptual, comprehensible, and grounded. Several steps are involved in selective coding. These steps do not necessarily occur in a linear pattern, nor are they separate in actual practice. Firstly, this involves explaining the story line and relating subsidiary categories around the core category by means of the paradigm. Secondly, it involves relating categories at the dimensional level and validating those relationships against the data. Lastly, it involves filling in categories that may need development and/or refinement (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In order to develop an integrated theory, I began by identifying the story through creating a general descriptive overview. Then I moved beyond description to

conceptualizing the story line (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I was able to name the central

phenomenon by asking many questions regarding the data. These questions included:

"What seems to be the main story line, the main pattern or theme that I see occurring over

and over again?" "What category do all the other categories seem to be leading up to or

pointing to?" "Which category seems to be of a higher level of abstraction than the

others?" (Corbin, 1986, p. 99). The core category "developing a greater sense of self,"

was discovered subsequent to asking myself these questions.

The core category is the central phenomenon or basic social process being studied

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It has several important functions for generating grounded

theory because it accounts for most of the variation in a pattern of behavior. These

functions are integration, density, saturation, completeness, and delimiting focus (Glaser,

1978, 1992). The core category will be furthered described in chapter four.

Following the discovery of the core category, the researcher must develop the

category in terms of its properties. After the properties of the core category are specified,

the researcher must relate the other categories to it, in so doing making them subsidiary

categories. In order to relate the other categories to the core category, the researcher must

again utilize the paradigm model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

While comparing the categories to the paradigm model, I continued to be

conscious of how the categories grouped together into phases of leaving and sustaining

the separation. Subsequent to comparing the categories to the paradigm model, four

phases emerged. Each phase was specified an abstract label to capture the process that

was taking place. For illustration, the categories of "rediscovering self" (context),

"focusing on self" (intervening conditions), "making a life of one's own" (strategies), and

"personal growth" (consequences) were incorporated in the major category labeled "reclaiming self."

During this process, I continued to ask myself how the subcategories linked to one another and to the major categories. Changes to the emerging phases were necessary as questioning preceded. For instance, I had moved the category "gaining awareness" to the first phase and I re-labeled the category "wanting something better" as a condition rather than a context of the second phase. These categories were arranged and rearranged in terms of their paradigmatic relationships until they seemed to adequately fit the storyline and to offer an analytic version of the story (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

<div style="text-align:center">Theoretical Memos</div>

This is the center stage in the process of generating theory. "Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). Memos lead naturally to ideation or abstraction. Memoing is a steady process that starts when first coding data, and continues through to the finish (Glaser, 1978).

The ideational development in memos accomplishes at least five important aspects of generating theory:

1. Raises the data to a conceptualization level.

2. Develops the properties of each category, which starts to define it operationally.

3. Presents hypotheses about connections between categories and/or their properties.

4. Starts to integrate these connections with clusters of other categories to generate the theory.

5. Begins to locate emerging theory with other theories with potentially more or less relevance.

A given memo may do one or more of these results, but does not require more than one (Glaser, 1978).

The freedom of memoing allows the researcher to work more rapidly, by having only to think of the idea, not its presentation (Glaser, 1978). Throughout the entire coding process, notes were taken regarding my thoughts and questions regarding the codes and the interrelationship of codes. These memos were recorded on index cards, for the purpose of sorting.

Theoretical Sorting

Sorting is the last stage of the grounded theory process. In order to formulate the theory for presentation to others, theoretical sorting of memos must occur. It involves setting up the memos in a theoretical outline in preparation for the writing stage (Glaser, 1978, 1998).

Theoretical sorting results in numerous critically vital benefits for theory writing. It forces connections between categories and properties and therefore creates a generalized, integrated model by which to write the theory. It retains a conceptual level, while preventing the regression back to mainly writing up data. It generates a dense, complex theory and provides a theoretical completeness to the theory (Glaser, 1978, 1992).

After the fifth interview, I began sorting the memos I had written. Sorting the theoretical memos allowed for theory formulation because it was a way of reintegrating

the data into a higher theoretical level. After the initial sorting was completed, a rough draft was written based on the data and the theoretical memos.

Journaling

A journal was kept throughout the entire research process. Within the journal my thoughts, feelings, and reflections were recorded. This journaling process was beneficial in that it allowed me to clear my thoughts. It also allowed me to remain aware of the personal preconceptions that I have which may have influenced the way I interpreted the data.

Personal Preconceptions

From my work experience at the women's shelter I have formed the following preconceptions. Firstly, I feel that abused women are not helpless victims, but rather are acting as best they can to resist and survive the abuse. Secondly, I feel these women are strong and competent women. I do not think of these women as passive and frail, as portrayed by the learned helplessness theory. Thirdly, I believe that these women can go on to lead a healthy lifestyle subsequent to leaving an abusive relationship. Fourthly, from the reading I had previously done in this area as well as my working experience at the shelter, I believe it is more difficult for women to permanently leave the relationship when there are children involved and when there are financial strains. Lastly, I also hold the belief that most women would leave and return several times before permanently ending the relationship.

Throughout the collecting of the data, coding, and analysis of the data I remained cognizant of my personal preconceptions. As mentioned previously, I kept an ongoing journal, which helped me to remain aware of my thoughts, and how the thoughts were

influencing the research process. However, although I was aware of my personal preconceptions I assume that some of my preconceptions may have colored the research process in terms of the data collection, coding, and analysis of the data.

Trustworthiness of Grounded Theory

The primary sources of trust in grounded theory are the four criteria for its evaluation: fit, relevance, work, and modifiability. If a grounded theory is cautiously induced from the substantive area, its categories and their properties will fit the realities under study in the eyes of participants, practitioners, and researchers in the area. Hence, fit is another word for validity, as it refers to whether the concept represents the pattern of data it purports to represent. This is the beginning functional requirement of relating theory to data (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1992, 1998). The current theory "fits" because it was induced from the substantive area; therefore, the categories "fit" the realities of the participants. The determination of "fit" was established through member checks.

The second criterion, relevance, emerges from fit. It is automatic that the emergent concepts will relate to the true issues of the participants in the substantive area. Grounded theory generates a theory of how real occurrences are repeatedly resolved. This leads to trust of justly getting at what's really going on, which is significant to the people in the substantive area and therefore will have an impact (Glaser, 1992, 1998). The current theory has "relevance" because it is applicable to the social or practical world and the individuals in that world. The emergent concepts relate to the true issues of the participants in this study. The participants in this study verified that the theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship captured their experiences. The

theory also has "relevance" for both counsellors and other women who are sustaining the separation.

The impact of fit and relevance leads to the third criteria, which is referred to as work. With concepts that fit and are relevant, the grounded theorist begins to integrate a core category that explains most of the variation of behavior in the substantive area. The grounded theorist begins to explain how the major concern of the participants is repeatedly resolved. The concepts and their theoretical coding are strongly related to what is occurring. This imbues with trust that the theorist can comprehend and apply a theory concerning a substantive area (Glaser, 1998). This theory "works" because the concepts can be applied in the substantive area. Thus, other women who are sustaining the separation may also find the theory useful in order to learn what other women's experiences were. Additionally, the theory explains and interprets the process of sustaining the separation, and predicts the phases that women may go through while leaving and sustaining the separation.

Through the constant-comparative method, the theory can be continually modified to fit and work with relevance. Modifiability is vital so the theory does not miss anything that cannot be readily included into it by modifying through constant comparison. The theory does not force the data; the theory becomes modified by it (Glaser, 1992, 1998).

The fourth criterion, modifiability, is essential for two reasons. Firstly, in many preconceiving, verification methods, it is the data that are poor, not the theory. Secondly, grounded theory illustrates that all data, no matter what their quality, can continually modify the theory through comparisons. This modifying is critical because it increases the formal abstraction and constantly keeps up with what is occurring as change happens.

Furthermore, it continuously corrects for poor data and it brings the theory into closer grounding (Glaser, 1998).

These four criteria produce trust because a theory with fit, relevance, and that works, and can easily be modified has "grab" without demands to force it on data. Glaser (1998) believes that people feel they can use this method meaningfully and that it is trustworthy to use. He states, "It is not based on impressionism, nor conjecture, but on a rigorous methodology that empowers." (p. 238).

<div style="text-align:center">Planning for Trustworthiness</div>

While the worth of quantitative research is determined primarily by assessing its reliability and validity, the worth of qualitative research is ascertained by assessing its trustworthiness (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986). In order to judge the trustworthiness of inquiries conducted within the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, the following criteria should be met: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Qualitative researchers use several techniques to establish trustworthiness. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this research project, I used techniques appropriate for this particular study. I will summarize the strategies in the following pages.

Credibility

Credibility represents the principle of truth-value. It refers to whether or not the researcher has established confidence in the truth of the findings for the participants in the particular context of the study (Krefting, 1991). Qualitative studies are considered credible when efforts to understand and illuminate human experience are met (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Sandelowski, 1986). That is, the study presents such vivid and accurate

descriptions of the human phenomenon under consideration that those involved recognize it from the descriptions, or those not involved can understand the phenomenon solely from the descriptions within the study.

To establish credibility, I utilized four strategies. The first is prolonged engagement, defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as, "the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purpose" (p. 301). To achieve this, I permitted sufficient time to engage the participants in conversation. Contact between myself and the participants included at least one telephone conversation and two interviews. Initial interviews lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. This contact period permitted a rapport to develop between the participants and myself, which I felt led to open sharing of personal information.

The second strategy I used was triangulation. This refers to the use of a number of different data collection methods, sources of data, investigators, or competing theories (Krefting, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In this study, the results were triangulated by ensuring that the participants reviewed each of their transcripts and the emerging framework. Each participant had the opportunity to analyze, clarify, and refine, as well as to contribute to the emerging theory. Another means of triangulation was the fit of the data with existing published studies, and how the results of the inquiry fit into available theoretical literature. Furthermore, I used different sources of data by interviewing seven women. Through the use of theoretical sampling, the data was triangulated, further enhancing credibility.

Thirdly, I ensured credibility by establishing referential adequacy. This is defined as "testing analyses and interpretations made after completion of the field portion of the study against documents, recordings, films, and the like that were collected or especially

produced for this purpose while the study was underway" (Guba, 1981, p.85).

Throughout this study, the constant comparison method was utilized. The evolving theory was compared with both the literature and the data.

A fourth strategy I used to increase credibility was completing member checks. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "the member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). I conducted member checks at two points in this study. Firstly, I sent each participant a transcription of the interview, requesting that the transcribed material be verified for accuracy and completeness. Secondly, each participant received a copy of the emerging theory to ensure that it fit for each participant. These "member checks" ensured that both the interviews and the theory that I developed were correct and/or fit with them.

Transferability

The consideration regarding applicability is addressed by ascertaining the extent to which the researcher has provided adequate descriptive data to enable others to apply or transfer the findings to other contexts or respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). "It is not possible, they believe, to develop "truth" statements that have general applicability; rather, one must be content with statements descriptive or interpretive of a given context-idiographic or context-relevant statements" (Guba, 1981, p. 85).

To augment the transferability of the study, I used two techniques. The first of these was to collect thick descriptive data (Guba, 1981). The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended questions were utilized to permit the participants to openly

share their experiences. Two interviews were conducted with each participant in order to verify the emerging theory. The participants also were able to clarify or make alterations to their transcript. Secondly, I engaged in theoretical sampling, which is "intended to maximize the range of information uncovered" (Guba, 1981). Participants who were viewed to be able to contribute to the theory were chosen, in addition to participants who could add to the variation of the theory.

Dependability

Where the validity of a quantitative study depends on its reliability, the dependability of a qualitative project rests on its credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The measures taken to enhance the credibility of this research helped increase its dependability. Dependability refers to the stability of the data (Guba, 1981). The measure that was taken in this study to establish dependability included the adherence to a decision trail as described by Krefting (1991).

Dependability is determined when another researcher is able to follow the "decision trail" of the researcher and reach essentially the same or similar conclusions in regard to the findings. The "decision trail" refers to coding decisions made from interview transcripts, the development of categories by grouping concepts that seem to address similar phenomena, and the unfolding of propositions regarding conceptual linkages and theory development (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

In this study, a decision trail was developed through the following: (1) keeping a journal from the beginning of the research process, (2) keeping code notes during analysis of data, (3) writing operational memos throughout the research process, (4) audio-recording the interviews and completing verbatim transcription, (5) verification of

transcribed material for accuracy and completeness, and (6) regular discussion with my supervisor about data collection and analysis problems, procedures, and techniques.

Confirmability

There has been a shift by qualitative researchers away from the concept of investigator objectivity toward the concept of data conformability (Guba, 1981). Conformability can be achieved through practicing reflexivity and triangulation, as previously explained. One technique that is highly recommended in support of reflexivity is to keep a journal in which introspections are recorded on an ongoing basis (Spradley, 1979). As previously mentioned, I kept a journal throughout the research process to record my own assumptions and to monitor my thoughts concerning the data and evolving theory.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, careful consideration was given to protect the confidentiality of each participant and the data collected. Safety measures for participants and for the researcher were built into the design, and implemented in the research process. Application for ethics review board clearance was requested before proceeding with recruiting interested participants. Ethics approval was received from the Conjoint Faculty Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary, on August 15, 2002.

The research process was guided by an awareness and appreciation of the significance and depth of meaning of life experiences such as those under study. All efforts were made to respect the sensitive nature of information requested, and to be cognizant of the difficult situations participants have experienced. Sensitivity to this required that all possible efforts be made to do no harm to women willing to participate in

the study. Protection of participants during the duration of the project was paramount. I was committed to the fair and ethical treatment of women who were willing to participate in this project.

Participants' contact with the researcher for this study was on a voluntary basis, in response to a posted advertisement (Appendix A), which reduced the risk of participants perceiving or experiencing coercion to participate. No names, addresses, or other identifying information was requested or recorded. Any names used inadvertently by the participant were changed in the transcription process. The use of self-assigned pseudonyms was utilized for each participant throughout the study, which ensured anonymity and further protected the confidentiality of each participant.

At the outset of the interview, each participant was provided with a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C) to review and sign. This information included the following: purpose of the study and the methods that would be utilized, duration of the study, role of the participant and researcher, and an explanation concerning what I intend to do with the research findings. This information was provided in a manner that was clear and comprehensible to the participants.

I anticipated that telling their stories and examining the process of sustaining the separation would be emotionally draining for these women. There was a potential for the interview to produce psychological stress in these women. Hence, before the interview commenced, these potential risks were discussed with the participants. I notified them that if the interview does produce stress or any other negative reaction they have access to a trained counsellor, if necessary.

Verbal and written information was provided in a clear and understandable manner to each participant regarding the ways of maintaining confidentiality, anonymity, and their privacy. It was explained that no one other than my supervisor and myself would have access to the raw data.

I made it very clear to each participant that they each have a full choice to withdraw their consent and to discontinue participating in the study at anytime without consequence. Thus, they could withdraw during the course of the interview or they could decide to withdraw their story that was given at a later date without consequence. Again, this information was given in a manner that was clear and understandable to the participants.

At the end of each interview, time was allocated to answer any questions raised by the participants. Additionally, participants were provided with information regarding who to contact in case of questions that they may have at a later time.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the grounded theory method. The rationale for using this method was provided. It also provided an overview of how the grounded theory method was applied in this study. Data collection and analysis were discussed. Lastly, the evaluation of trustworthiness, as well as compliances with ethical standards were highlighted.

CHAPTER FOUR

A GROUNDED THEORY OF SUSTAINING THE DECISION TO LEAVE AN

ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

This chapter describes the grounded theory of sustaining the decision to leave an

abusive relationship. The theory is explained in four phases: disempowerment of self,

empowering the self, regaining self, and reclaiming self. Each phase will be outlined in

the following sections. In addition, the core category, developing a greater sense of self,

is described and is related to the current theory.

The theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship was

developed from the interviews with seven women. The categories of each phase were

organized by utilizing the paradigm model, which was outlined in chapter three (Strauss

& Corbin, 1990). The paradigm model is used to illustrate the connections and indicate

relationships between the categories.

The phases of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship are

presented in a linear and step-wise manner for heuristic purposes. However, it is

important to understand that the phases did not necessarily occur in this fashion. In

actuality, the women experienced these phases of sustaining the separation in more of a

spiral fashion. Additionally, the phases occurred in an interrelated complex and often

concurrent pattern, rather than in discrete steps.

Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship

Phase I: Disempowerment of Self

Within this phase, each of the participants experienced a loss of self. Their self-

esteem and self-efficacy were diminished from continually being abused by their partner.

The women were experiencing various forms of abuse and were dissatisfied with their relationship. They were confused, hurt, and unsure about what to do regarding their situation. However, by the end of this phase, the women were beginning to reevaluate their relationship. Refer to Table 2 below for a summary of phase I.

Table 2

Phase I: Disempowerment of self

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Dissatisfaction	Hope Difficulty identifying abuse
Conditions	Distress	Isolation Physical abuse Financial abuse Psychological abuse Sexual abuse Fear Deception
Strategies	Assessing the situation	Gathering information
Consequences	Gaining awareness	Realization

Context

Dissatisfaction

The context involved at this beginning stage was **dissatisfaction**. All of the participants expressed a clear **dissatisfaction** with their relationship. The participants spoke of not getting what they wanted from the relationship, not experiencing happiness, and feeling that something in the relationship seemed wrong. As one participant commented:

I was dissatisfied in the relationship for a long time. I was very unhappy and scared all of the time. I didn't know coming home from work if I would be faced with the loving husband who was going to rub my feet after being on my feet for eight hours when I was pregnant, or this monster that when I walked in the door was going to throw dishes at my head. I was depressed.

The two subcategories of **dissatisfaction** include **hope** and **difficulty identifying abuse**.

Hope. While all of the women acknowledged they were dissatisfied in the relationship, some of the women had hoped that things within the relationship would improve. Some were holding on to the good times, while others were holding on to the **hope** that their partners could change. This is illustrated in the following comments:

It's not really that bad you can handle the anger. Maybe you can convince him to go to counselling, maybe you could make it work and then the other part of me would think I just can't stand the outbursts.

The person that I dated within two weeks of our wedding was dead and the confusion and not understanding where this person went. It's really confusing because you are looking at this person who presented themselves as one thing but you are experiencing something so totally different and you love them but they are not the person that you love and you think I will just give it a little bit of time and it will get better.

I always thought that we could work it out and that what ever was going on with him, the excessive drinking, it would pass. But you know you finally get to the point where you go no it's just getting worse, it is not passing.

For Michelle, her **hope** was extended by the desire to have a child with her partner. This is illustrated in the following comment:

I had very much wanted to have a child and I knew that my biological clock was coming to an end so that was something that had also kept me very committed to the relationship. I really, really wanted to make it work because I finally found someone who I had really loved and wanted to have a child with him.

Difficulty identifying abuse. Several of the participants explained that although they knew they were dissatisfied within the relationship they had **difficulty identifying**

the abuse they were experiencing. Most participants talked about struggling with defining abusive behavior and deciding what was abuse as opposed to normal behavior. This was especially true for the women who were enduring verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse. Examples of this are shared in the following comments:

> I wasn't thinking clearly, I was tremendously depressed. I knew something was wrong, but it's like I had no idea to the extent, no idea of the extent that I never thought I was abused. I never thought I would allow myself to be abused. There was no physical abuse so it wasn't like you could see the bruises, but it was after the fact I realized I've been mentally, emotionally, and financially abused.

> I was never physically abused and so it was always difficult for me. One of the struggles I had in the relationship and deciding whether to leave was I could not figure out whether this was an abusive relationship or not. The abuse was verbal and it was what I think one would consider to be emotional, but I couldn't really identify it, it was difficult for me.

> It was hard to realize it was abusive, it wasn't easy to identify because he was a manipulator and I didn't want to see that because I was in such a vulnerable state...I was blind...I wanted to have a relationship be successful and to be loved.

<div align="center">Intervening Conditions</div>

Distress

In this phase the women appeared to be in **distress**. Each of the participants was experiencing abuse inflicted upon her by the partner. Experiencing abusive behaviors caused much **distress** in each of the participant's lives. This **distress** took many forms, which comprised of experiencing isolation, physical abuse, financial abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, fear, and deception.

Isolation. Experiencing isolation included being isolated by their partner from their friends and family. Several of the participants experienced being isolated. The isolation caused severe distress in these women. Friends and family were an intricate part of their lives and now they were no longer able to freely spend time with them.

Physical abuse. Three of the women experienced physical abuse from their partner. Some of the participants experienced physical abuse on a regular basis, while others experienced it intermittently throughout the relationship. Some examples include:

> The second time he hit me, he didn't just hit me he beat me up pretty bad. He almost killed me essentially and he hit me so hard that I had bruises and bleeding from my head and my face and bumps all over my head. He even choked me with a mosquito net and kicked me. You name it and he did it to me.

> He was starting to abuse our pet rabbit, picking her up by the ears and kicking her. I was really uncomfortable with it and I told him so and he got really really mad at me and that's the first time he had ever hit me. There wasn't so much physical abuse, there were episodes of it throughout the rest of our marriage, but it was mostly psychological, emotional, verbal, and sexual.

> When I was eight and a half months pregnant he threw me down four and a half flights of stairs, claimed it was an accident, but it wasn't. He was mad at me and he threw me. It wasn't just an accidental nudge, he threw me.

Financial abuse. Some of the participants were financially abused by their partner. Their partner would take and spend large amounts of money without informing the women. The partners were also financially abusive in that they would not allow the women to spend any money and would become extremely angry if they did. Betty shared that her partner would become angry when she spent more money than he thought she should on needed groceries. Crystal explained that she was never allowed to buy anything for herself.

Psychological abuse. The women all experienced some form of psychological abuse, including emotional and verbal abuse. Their partners would demean the women, which affected their sense of self worth. As Crystal shared:

> Some of the stuff he would accuse me of was just out of this world. I would say the worst was and I personally believe the most damaging was the psychological abuse. Because physical bruises heal, I mean you always remember getting smacked around and the cursing and stuff...but the psychological stuff, you just become so ingrained to believe.

All of the participants were also being controlled by their partner. For some women, their abusive partner needed to know exactly where they were, what they were doing, and with whom. Some partners also controlled what they were allowed and not allowed to do. This is shared in the following comments:

> My parents are very strong Christians and we were raised in a Christian home and the kids were too. I started going to church, church was a taboo with my ex, you didn't bring it up. There would be no way that I could ever go. I did a couple of times and I paid for it.

> He would get upset if I would talk on the phone when he wasn't around. He wasn't comfortable with me talking with my male friends or going out for lunch at work. It got to the point where he had a phone trace put on our line so that every month when the phone bill came he would have a record of all incoming and outgoing calls.

Sexual abuse. Two of the participants had endured some form of sexual abuse. One of the participants explained that her partner would demand sex and she was forced to comply because if she dared to say no he would then accuse her of cheating. Another participant shared that her husband had raped her; however, she was not aware that she had been sexually abused until after she had left the relationship and sought support from a counsellor.

Fear. Each of the participants mentioned that she experienced fear at some point in her relationship. For some participants, this fear became so deeply ingrained that they were scared for their safety on an everyday basis.

Deception. The participants all experienced deception in that they were led to believe that their partners were kind individuals, not capable of being abusers. Three of the participants were also cheated on or deceived by a lie. As Elizabeth commented:

> We weren't really married, we didn't have a marriage, we had a wedding.
> Because things really started to fall apart about a week after we were
> married...there is so much that is easy to hide in a dating relationship...like his
> debt load...he was on all these drugs, he was really into pornography, all these
> thing that he just lied about.

Strategies

Assessing the Situation

Due to the fact that these women were dissatisfied and experiencing distress, they

began **assessing the situation**. Each participant was asking questions of herself regarding

her relationship and her own happiness. Some of the women reflected on their prior

experience and education in order to assess the situation they were in:

> The fact that my background is social work and I had counselled suicidal
> individuals for a number of years on a crisis line and had been exposed to this
> kind of cycle and I wasn't going to get caught up in it. So that gave me the
> theoretical knowledge if you will to back up that what I was feeling was not my
> fault per se and I am not guilty of anything.

> I am a lawyer with professional training and when I went to law school I
> remember taking a course in family law and in that course we learned about the
> cycle of domestic violence...it was after some time that I had been in it when I
> remember thinking back about this cycle of domestic violence and being quite
> astonished actually that I began to identify it for myself.

Zelda explained that she began making a pros and cons list to aid her in assessing

her relationship:

> What I did was actually made a list of pros and cons and I think it was helpful to
> actually see it in front of my face because you can live it but until you know...I
> got to the point were I weighed the pros and cons of staying with him and the
> cons were well out weighing the pros...you start to see the pattern.

The subcategory of **assessing the situation** is **gathering information**.

Gathering information. The women also began to assess the situation they were in by **gathering information**. The information they gathered came from a variety of sources. All of the women suggested that this was a pivotal step in their decision-making:

> Knowledge is power; get as much knowledge as you can so you can make an informed decision so that you know what to expect out there, you know what supports are available, you know what financial avenues are available and so you know where you will go.

> Gather as much information regarding the situation as you can and speak to anybody, a counsellor, a supportive member of the family, whoever will support you, talk with them and get their advice so that you can plan a route.

The women gathered information in various ways. Some of the women gathered information through various readings and through searching the Internet:

> So I did everything I could, I remember ordering books over the internet...one book was called "Too Good to Leave and Too Bad to Stay" and it was a book on how to decide whether or not to leave a relationship...I was very mixed up and I did not know what to do.

> I looked on the internet for different things, I found a website called break up girl. I remember I used to look at that all the time and try to get information about people who had made decisions to leave and why, whether they felt it was a mistake and what they did afterwards. I was trying to gather any information I could.

Some of the women found information by talking with friends, family, and counsellors. One of the participants experienced a negative encounter while seeking information. Elizabeth explained that her church was informing her that she had to stay in the abusive relationship. As Elizabeth shared:

> I found out shortly after I noticed these behavioral changes that I was pregnant and because of my church I went to talk to my bishop and he told me no matter what I needed to stay and work this out for my child. So I stayed...when I was eight and a half months pregnant he threw me down four and a half flights of stairs...so I went to the police and filed a report and went to my bishop again and said, "look he is going to kill me, this is getting worse, he is going to kill me, he is going to kill my child, I am scared." They still said that I had to stay so I stayed and tried to work it out. I did everything I possibly could.

Consequences

Gaining Awareness

The gathering of information from one or more sources strengthened the women's growing awareness that they were indeed involved in an abusive relationship. This is clearly articulated in the following comments:

> I gained awareness in stages, getting awareness of where I wanted to be and knowing that where I am is not where I want to be...I gained awareness that I did not want to be in that abusive situation.

> So I kind of had this stereotyped idea that it must be women who are not publicly educated and maybe not very well liberated as it were, and don't have really high self-esteem. I certainly did not think it would be a professional educated women such as I considered myself to be. However, through the readings that I did I gained awareness that I was in an abusive relationship. ·

The women also gained awareness regarding how the relationship had changed them:

> I felt I was starting to change things, what I could say or do around the person. So I was striving to change my behavior and speech so not to do anything that would initiate a temper outburst and when I read about that they said that was not a healthy way...that was one of the signs where in the situation you begin changing who you are.

The subcategory of **gaining awareness** is **realization.**

Realization. While **gaining awareness** the participants experienced realizations throughout the process. **Realization** refers to the women acknowledging to themselves that they were abused. It also involves realizing that the relationship was not going to improve or change. Most women explained that the realizations came at different stages and at different times. The majority of the participants also realized that they could not change their partner's behavior. Living shared that she could not change her partner; he could only change himself if he recognized the problem. Michelle also explained that if

the partner does not recognize that they have a problem then there is nothing you can do as the victim.

<div style="text-align:center">Phase II: Empowering the Self</div>

In this phase, the participants began disengaging from the relationship and thinking of themselves. Although these women had hoped things could improve they realized things were not going to change, which allowed them to slowly let go of the relationship. They gradually gained the inner strength to want something better in their lives and began planning to leave the abusive relationship. Refer to Table 3 below for a summary of phase II.

<div style="text-align:center">Table 3</div>

Phase II: Empowering the self

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Letting go of the relationship	Doing more for self Letting go of hope
Conditions	Wanting something better Gaining Strength Triggered event	Readiness Gaining a voice
Strategies	Seeking support Planning	
Consequences	Leaving	Questioning decision Persuasion by partner Returning

Context

Letting Go of the Relationship

The context of the second phase is **letting go of the relationship**. The participants began to detach themselves from their abusive partner. They started to pull away from them emotionally, sexually, and by taking less responsibility for the relationship. Michelle shared that she did not at that point have the strength to say that she was leaving the relationship completely, but she had made the break within herself. Although Crystal still loved her partner she knew that love was not enough, it wasn't going to get them through it and so she began to let go. Zelda shared the following:

> It was almost as if I gave myself permission to let go that it was okay, it is not your fault, you did the best you could and even though you are giving up hope on this doesn't mean that you have to give up hope on the rest of your life...I think it was validating my own beliefs that it was okay to let go and it was okay to give up hope.

There are two subcategories for **letting go of the relationship: doing more for self** and **letting go of hope**.

Doing more for self. This refers to the women's efforts to view themselves as separate from their partner and begin to make decisions and do things for themselves, rather than for their partner. Living was residing in a foreign country with her husband and his family and she recalled beginning to look for things that she could do for herself without having to depend on her husband and his family. Zelda recalled doing more for herself in the following ways:

> Doing more for myself, going out with my friends when I wanted to...not cow towing to him. The one thing I used to do was I cooked, I cleaned, and I did the whole whack of things. So I guess in the sense of doing things for myself, more like I am going to cook for me and you can fend for yourself. Everything I used to do for us, I no longer did for him and I did it for me. The things that I had put on hold for so many years I was no longer putting on hold or things I was subjecting

myself to. I was no longer subjecting myself to that. That's what I was doing for me.

Letting go of hope. While each of the participants were **letting go of the relationship** they were also **letting go of hope** that the relationship could improve or that their partner could change. Descriptions of **letting go of hope** from the participants include:

> I was letting go of the hope that it [the relationship] would last because I thought I was in there for life and then my hope started to diminish over time as the relationship got worse and so I let go of that hope.

> I allowed myself to give up hope and I think that was really really hard for me to do... and I guess, when I reflect back on it he was treating me the same right from the beginning but I think because I had given up hope I was seeing him for what he truly was.

Michelle desired a child from the relationship, so she began to let go of the hope that it was going to happen:

> I think coming to terms and recognizing that having a child in that kind of relationship would be really, really difficult. And letting go of that dream, letting go of that dream and recognizing that it was just not going to happen for me.

Intervening Conditions

There are three intervening conditions in phase two: **wanting something better, gaining strength,** and **triggered event.**

Wanting Something Better

In phase two, all of the participants explained that they began to desire something better for themselves. As Living shared:

> I deserve something better, I deserve somebody that can match my wit, my intelligence. Somebody who can inspire me and I can inspire them. Somebody who can meet me on all levels and where we can continue to grow and become fuller richer people...realizing that I deserve better and that there is someone out there who will be able to me at those levels and to grow with me.

Participants who had children also wanted something better for their children.

They did not want their children growing up in an abusive environment. As Jane shared:

> The welfare of my child; that was the driving force. I remember specifically
> saying to myself and saying to him, "I am not raising my child in this household, I
> am not raising my child like that." I saw her reactions and just the desire to have a
> better life for my child and the knowledge that I could provide it, irrespective of
> his influence and input, I could provide this.

Gaining Strength

The women slowly gained the inner strength to stand up for themselves within the

relationship. They were building on their self-esteem that had been diminished. Often this

can become a very dangerous period for these women because their abusive partner may

begin reacting negatively to their inner strength. An example of **gaining strength** is

reflected in the following comment from Zelda:

> I think with each little increment I made I gained strength...it was the increments
> of little decisions and gaining the strength, and I guess gaining my own self-
> esteem...he liked to seclude me from my friends and so I guess I got to a point
> where I didn't want to be secluded anymore and I started to venture out again. I
> guess it got to the point where I didn't care if he would ignore me; it didn't matter
> because even if he didn't ignore me, he still wasn't giving me what I wanted out
> of the relationship.

Michelle gained her strength while she was maintaining a long-distance

relationship with her partner:

> We were continuing this long distance relationship and while I was away from
> him I began to see the relationship somehow in a different light. I started to think
> about how I had felt when I had been with him and I found myself regaining my
> self-esteem because I was not with him all the time. I was on my own and I began
> to feel like my old self was coming back.

Subcategories of **gaining strength** are **readiness** and **gaining a voice**.

Readiness. The participants all described a **readiness** to leave their relationship.

They had made a decision in their own minds that the relationship was going to end. For

the majority of women this decision came over a long period of time. Although they knew they were going to leave, the majority of women had not yet informed their partner of their decision, nor had they told anyone else of their decision. For example, Zelda shared that she knew she was ready to exit the relationship; she just needed to share her decision and make necessary plans.

Gaining a voice. As the women gained strength they began expressing their dissatisfaction of the relationship with their partner. Some of the women also began informing their partner of their decision to leave the relationship. As one participant noted:

> I was finally not afraid to leave and I was finally not afraid of what he would say. He didn't have anything to hold over my head anymore. So I allowed myself to display the anger that I always wanted to, even though there were times when I displayed the anger but then you pay for it.

Triggered Event

All of the participants experienced a **triggered event**, which made the decision to leave even clearer, and the decision was then translated into action. For six of the participants, the **triggered event** was directly related to the immediate and serious nature of threats to their own safety, and for some, their children's safety. Elizabeth shared that one evening she found her husband shaking their two-month-old child. Other participants expressed the following:

> I was never physically abused but when the person came to visit me in the new city at one point he did throw something, not at me but something at the fence that was behind me and I remember feeling really really frightened at that point, really really frightened and actually that was probably one of the decisions, that was a point when I decided I was not going to stay in the relationship. I could not stay with an abuser.

> The second time he hit me, he didn't just hit me he beat me up pretty bad. He almost killed me essentially and he hit me so hard that I had bruises and bleeding

from my head and my face and bumps all over my head and he even choked me with a mosquito net and kicked... I just wanted to get out, fast as possible, because I thought if I stayed I probably would have killed him.

It was the first time it happened in front of my kids. Now the kids were much older, they were sixteen and nineteen at the time...when it actually got to the point where they were there and witnessed it I realized that this is just getting worse and worse and worse, there is no fixing this.

Strategies

There are two strategies in the second phase: **seeking support**, and **planning**.

Seeking Support

After the women made the decision to leave the relationship they began **seeking**

support from their family, friends, and other supports in their lives. The women

discussed the importance of their friends and family throughout this phase. Most of the

participants explained that they wanted support from people they cared about and they

wanted their support system to verify that they were making the right decision.

Additionally, the participants needed to know that they would have a safe, non-

judgmental and supportive network behind them.

As soon as Elizabeth decided to leave, despite her bishop's advice, different

supports opened up for her. As Elizabeth shared:

As soon as I made the decision to leave and went and talked to a different bishop, the church was 100% behind me. My parents said, "good you finally made the decision to leave, we will support you." As soon as I made the decision to leave all kinds of avenues of support opened up that were not there when I was thinking about it.

Some of the participants also sought support from their religious faith or

spirituality during this time. Some examples include: "I've prayed all my life but I think

when I was going through this tumultuous time it was more important for me to pray or

rely more on prayer."

You are talking to God...I guess it was some kind of guidance or you know here I am, I am finally strong enough to do it and its almost like hold my hand and get me over this threshold. So maybe it was a transfer of hope, even though I had people, tangible people, who were here and supporting me, I just needed that other support...I guess an unconditional love.

I was now prepared to surrender my life in a way to God and say well whatever you have for me in my life. So that was kind of a very deeply spiritual time and it was a strengthening of the spirit and the soul.

Planning

During this phase, the majority of the participants completed some form of planning. They had made the decision to leave and so they began planning the details of their departure from the relationship. During the interviews, the majority of the participants stressed the importance of planning. They stressed the importance of making a plan to leave and also trying to secure some money.

Some of the ways the participants in this study planned were by talking to a lawyer or legal aid, making sure they had a place to stay when they left, and securing some money of their own. As Jane shared:

I was home on maternity leave, I had the mail and so I banked all of my employment insurance checks. I was lucky in that respect that he was controlling, but I had control of the finances at home... so I think I did as much as I thought I could or as much as I thought was necessary while in the relationship in order to get out. Even though I had my support network out there, stepping back and evaluating what I had to do and then planning it before I made the move was a good thing...I knew what I had to put in place and did it as well.

Consequences

Leaving

The women decided to carry out their decision to leave their partner and remove themselves from the abusive relationship. Leaving an abusive relationship is often a distressing and frightening event for the women who experience it. Leaving requires

tremendous courage and strength. It is important to view leaving as a process, not as a single event. It should be viewed in the context of the whole process, which is dependent upon the knowledge, experience, emotional growth, and effort, which have accumulated throughout the phases. The participants shared the following:

> It is really really scary, you don't know where you are going to go, you don't know where you are going to live, especially if you have kids, its terrifying to do it. I thought that I would be completely on my own, I was on maternity leave, I didn't have an apartment or anywhere to go... but once you make that separation there is so many avenues open to you that you didn't even know about when you were in it. It's like when you are in that you have tunnel vision and you just can't see the rest of the world. You are focusing so much on surviving that anything beyond that is irrelevant and it's the same thing when you first leave. When you first leave the feeling is great, oh my god I can't believe I did it, he is gone, wow. Okay now how am I going to make ends meet, how am I going to survive?

> It is a fear factor, that's all it comes down to. You become so programmed and you become so fearful; I was thinking things like if we ever split up what am I going to do, I will only have my pay, which was stupid because I never ever saw my pay anyways...and you don't realize until you are out of it how great it is, you know you can get through anything after getting through that.

> I think anytime you leave a serious committed relationship your entire life is going to change and that is really scary when you are thinking about walking away. Because you are not just walking away from the person you are walking away from everything you know and in your mind there is no guarantee that what is on the other side is going to be better.

For Zelda, the act of leaving was easier because she had been planning to leave for a long period of time. As Zelda shared:

> I got accepted into university and then I told him I was leaving and then I quit my job and then I went to live with my mom, so it was bing, bing, bing, bing. And people say you know how did you learn to live with all of that change, but it just felt right and I don't know if it was the whole spiritual guidance thing but everything started just falling into place, it was like I was finally making all the right decisions.

For Living, the act of leaving was absolutely necessary in her mind. As she explained:

> After I got beat up I said that is it I am out of here. I left out of self-respect for myself and to hang on to what ever values I had left in me...I felt like killing the guy... I was at that extreme and I have never been at that extreme ever before, I was so angry...I guess self-control because if I didn't leave I would have done something that was out of control...taking myself out of the situation...thinking about safety and my own welfare.

The three subcategories of **leaving** are **questioning the decision, persuasion by partner,** and **returning.**

Questioning the decision. A few of the participants began questioning their decision subsequent to leaving the relationship. They were feeling confused and self-doubting their decision. This is articulated in the following comment from Michelle:

> I guess after about two months or so I began to think that I had made a terrible mistake, a terrible mistake. I was really missing my partner. So I had begun to think that I had made a really big mistake. I had begun to revisit all the things that had taken up that period of three months and began mulling over and over again.

Persuasion by partner. Some of the participants' partners began to contact them after they had left the relationship. As the women explained, the partners were attempting to convince them that they should return home. The men began contacting these women by email and telephone to initiate communication. As Living shared:

> He was manipulating my states...he was very aware of the state I was in. All I can think of is vulture, because a vulture swoops in and eats you up when you are in your most vulnerable state and they are quite aware of what state you are in...he phoned me when I was vulnerable because my father passed away, so I began questioning.

Returning. Three of the participants returned to their partner for various periods of time. Some of the participants returned more than once, while others returned only once. Michelle explained that she returned to her partner, but when she returned nothing had

changed so she knew that things were not going to work out. Crystal shared that she and her partner started seeing one another again but she also realized that things were never going to change.

Phase III: Regaining Self

In this phase, the participants had left their abusive partner and had begun to rebuild a life for themselves. This was a challenging process for some of these women. The majority of the women experienced a low period subsequent to leaving; however, at the same time their sense of self was being reestablished. They were gaining back their sense of self-worth and self-esteem, which were diminished while they were in the abusive relationship. Please refer to Table 4 below for a summary of phase III.

Table 4

Phase III: Regaining self

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Grieving	Anger Devastation
Conditions	Transition Challenges	Distancing Safety Financial Hardships
Strategies	Seeking support Faith & Spirituality	
Consequences	Regaining control	Reaffirming decision Sense of relief Gaining strength Increase in self-acceptance

Context

Grieving

Upon leaving the relationship, the participants went through a period of grieving. Grieving consisted of dealing with intense, complex, and conflicting emotions. They were grieving over the loss of their partner and the relationship. It consisted not only of sadness, but loss, anger, frustration, shame, and fear. This is clearly articulated by a number of the participants:

> You are grieving, you grieve your old life and what could have been...you get angry, you pity yourself, you get sad, and you go through denial. There are all these steps you have to go through when a relationship dies, because a relationship isn't just a thing, it is a living entity. It's something that you put so much time, energy, and effort into and when it doesn't work out it's devastating to have to admit to yourself that you wasted that much time on something that was so wrong.

> There are still great days, there are still bad days; even fourteen months after the fact. I still have days where I just cry, but I am getting through it and it is happening less and less often and you know it maybe true that whatever doesn't kill you makes you want to die, but it also makes you stronger.

The two subcategories of **grieving** are **anger** and **devastation.**

Anger. Most of the participants experienced anger directed towards their partner. They were angry with their partner and the abuse they inflicted upon them. This is illustrated in the following comment:

> Anger! I hated him for the longest time; I would have gladly seen him dead. I spent a lot of time being very angry with him and there are still times that I am really frustrated and really angry, but over time it has come down to a more reasonable level.

Devastation. Many of the participants were also devastated over the loss of their relationship. Although their partners were abusive, the majority of the participants still loved and cared for their partner. The participants expressed the following:

I was in such a deep depression, my marriage had failed. According to people in my church who didn't know the whole situation, it was my fault: the woman always catches the blame when a marriage ends, "you should have done something differently, and you should have made it work."

I lost a lot of weight, a lot of weight and I am not a very big person to begin with. I probably lost about twenty or twenty-five pounds. I couldn't sleep, couldn't concentrate at work, everything was hectic, everything. I guess I grieved right through, like I guess for six months.

Conditions

There are two conditions in phase three: **transition** and **challenges**.

Transition

All of the participants experienced a **transition** period after leaving their partner. Many of the participants had to move to a new residence and start over again. Some of the participants also decided to go back to school and pursue an education. The following comments illustrate the various transitions that were experienced:

I think it was preparing to start a whole new life. I was in a new location, I moved back with my mom, even though it wasn't new I had my school to look forward to and I spent a lot of time with my friends.

I moved in with my parents, I moved to the other side of the city, I have a boyfriend, well kind of, it is casual, its fun. Really another big change is the fact that I have a child because my son was two months olds when we split up. Really the marriage was over before he was born so that was a big adjustment I made mostly on my own. I have new friends, a new house, everything is different and it really helped me to make this separation from the relationship.

The condition of **transition** had the two following subcategories: **distancing** and **safety**.

Distancing. It was extremely helpful for some of the participants to move away from where their partner was living. Not having any contact with their partner provided the women with the distance they needed to move on with their lives. As one of the participants shared:

I guess distance, yes distance and time; geographical distance is what I mean. Well with more time that you aren't in contact with them other things happen. It has also given me time to deal with feelings because dealing with feelings is always a long process.

Safety. Three of the participants felt that their safety was in jeopardy subsequent to leaving their relationship. Living had safety measures placed on her phone because her partner continued to phone her and would not leave her alone. Elizabeth explained that her partner actually broke into her new home one evening; luckily the neighbor became aware of this and was able to chase him out. Betty went and talked with counsellors at the women's shelter to discuss what she could do to protect her and her child's safety. She followed their advice by moving to a residence where she did not have to get utilities or have the phone put in her name. Betty was also extremely concerned about her daughter's safety. As Betty shared:

> For one year I put her into three kindergartens because I was afraid of him finding her and taking her because I didn't have any legal backing. This had been going on for two plus years and I moved so many times because I was so afraid.

Some of the participants continue to fear for their children's safety:

> The fact that my son's rights haven't been defended at. The court ordered unsupervised access, even with a restraining order in place, the child welfare record of the attack on him, and police records of the attacks on me. Apparently the rights of a sperm donor are more important than the rights of a child. I feel really helpless and I am still scared for my son whenever he is with him.

> Because we have a child I am never going to be free from him, he is always going to be my child's father...he makes it as difficult as humanly possible, everything has to be a conflict and a fight. He doesn't understand that it isn't about him and I anymore, it is about our son and I don't know if he ever will. It's hell to have to send my child with him in the morning. My son doesn't like going with him at all. The risk of injury to my son is still there and there is nothing I can do about it and that is what kills me...I live in terror that next Christmas it will be my son instead of the kid named Cole whose father shot him.

Challenges

After leaving the relationship, some of the women endured and continue to endure **challenges**. Some of the participants who had children and those who experienced a financial loss seemed to endure many challenges subsequent to leaving. The condition of **challenges** had the following subcategory: **financial hardships**.

Financial hardships. **Financial hardships** were and for some remained an inhibiting factor for the women. This is illustrated in the words of the participants:

> I never thought I would ever be there [food bank] and number two why am I there when my husband is making 200,000 dollars a year. Why am I standing at the food bank and my kid is here, she doesn't know, she is happy and I am weeping.

> How am I going to support my child, how am I going to do this because I'm basically doing it on my own. He is contributing little to nothing and what he is contributing, I can't count on. So it's scary.

<p style="text-align:center">Strategies</p>

There are two strategies in the third phase of sustaining the decision to leave the abusive relationship: **seeking support** and **faith and spirituality**.

Seeking Support

After leaving the relationship, each of the participants sought out support from a variety of sources including legal aid, friends, family, coworkers, and counsellors. They all received emotional support, while some participants received financial support as well. **Seeking support** at this point in time seemed to be extremely important in sustaining their decision to leave their abusive relationship. Betty explained that she went and saw a counsellor in order to get direction. Additionally, she expressed that three of her sisters have been exceptional as far as helping her out. Zelda and Michelle both discussed how important their friendships were during this time. As Zelda shared:

> I think the biggest one was spending time with my friends because if I thought about it, perhaps if I didn't have them to spend time with I might have been at home pondering, "am I making the right decision, oh God did I do the right thing." So they kept me busy, they never gave me the opportunity to be alone, especially on the weekends. Support and reaffirming was what the friends gave and opportunity to choose.

Jane stressed the importance of her family and friends:

> Family, parents, siblings, extended family like my mom's sister; they were there and the door is always open... I have very supportive family and friends, big supportive network, extended family, and coworkers.

Living began seeing a counsellor and felt she was able to work on some abuse issues. She also discussed the importance of having her friends and mentors to listen to her, as well as the incredible support from her mother:

> My friends, it has just been good for me to have their listening ear. Also when I needed some strength to draw upon my mother was there. My mom has been amazingly patient and amazingly understanding and being there no matter what, unconditionally, has helped me immensely. As well, talking to the mentors. I have one mentor right now...it's having people like her in my life, especially her, has been really helpful in sustaining the decision not to go back to the abusive relationships.

Elizabeth explained that the support from her parents and friends was incredible:

> I couldn't have done it without my parents and my friends...my parents made it all possible. I'm living in their basement, which isn't the optimal situation for a single parent, but they are paying for my food, room and board, and other things so that I can go to school and finish my education. They have been really supportive.

Faith and Spirituality

Some of the participants began revisiting their **faith and spirituality**. They found that their **faith and spirituality** provided guidance and renewed strength. Living explained that she returned to the Cree culture, the Native spirituality, which she found to be extremely helpful. She also mentioned that she returned to the elders, which provided her with further guidance. Michelle shared the following:

I had joined a church and I was going to the alpha program that they had there and I was quite active in the program. I think that really helped me as well because it helped me in the sense to really completely feel that I was prepared to surrender my will fully to a higher being. So that was a very deeply spiritual time and it was a strengthening of the spirit and the soul. It was like a time for a resurrection for me in a sense, a time for renewal.

Consequences

Regaining Control

As time progressed, the participants began **regaining control** of their lives. As they regained control they also regained the freedom they previously did not have. They were able to make decisions on their own and pursue the life that they wanted. This is articulated in the following comments:

> I regained all of that freedom... I could return to school if I wanted to which I did, I could raise my child the way I wanted to. I could be myself again sort of speak...the freedom to continue being a competent person.

> I am free to make phone calls. I am free to go out and have a drink if I want to. I am free to go to school and take classes that I want. My head is so much clearer, I feel so much better about my self, the list of pros just goes on and on...I have a life now.

Regaining control consisted of the following subcategories: **reaffirming decision, gaining strength, sense of relief,** and **increase in self-acceptance.**

Reaffirming decision. All of the participants spoke of reaffirming the decision they had made in the process of **regaining control.** They became confident that they had made the right decision to leave the relationship. As Betty stated, "I am confident that I made the right decision, made the right decision to not want to go back to that." Other participants shared the following:

> Reminding myself of the negative things, something that I don't want in my life, violence, abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse... all I could think about was that horrid night and you know all of the other negative things that happened for

me to stay away from it. So I constantly remind myself of what I do not want, I know what I do not want because I have experienced what I do not want.

When you are in it you have this pressure to make it work for the children but at the same time there is a pressure to protect your children and once you realize how bad it is and you leave it's all about the kids. That's the reason that it was so hard to walk away but that's the reason it is so easy not to go back.

Gaining strength. Having made the decision to leave and to take action on that decision restored some self-esteem and self-efficacy for the participants. This is exemplified by the subsequent comments:

The fact that I did it, regained my sense of self. It's interesting you know how the other person's behavior and activities can widdle away, just little bit by little bit, and you don't even realize what is happening.

Strength though, I feel so much stronger now. A year later, there are still days when I feel completely helpless, like a little child that just wants to crawl in a hole and die but I know that I can get past anything because I have survived this far and everyday it gets better.

I guess I have gained the strength to stand up and say what I believe in and who I am and no one will change my mind ever. No one will ever ever again beat me down like that because that is exactly what it is, is being beaten down.

Sense of relief. All of the participants felt a **sense of relief** that they were no longer in the relationship. The women were gaining excitement about their new lives without their partner and were relieved that abuse was no longer a part of their lives. The participants expressed relief in knowing that abuse no longer has a place in their lives. They also expressed relief in being free from their abusers.

Increase in self-acceptance. As the women regained control of their lives and gained strength, they also began to accept themselves. Crystal shared that as she spent more time alone she began to be happy to be on her own. She was accepting of who she was and what she had been through. Elizabeth shared that for a while she did not like the

person she was, she felt bitter and angry. However, after leaving her partner she began developing herself as a person and became more self-accepting.

Phase IV: Reclaiming Self

During this phase, the participants reclaimed their sense of self. Each of the participants moved on with her life and learned from her past relationship. Each of the participants grew as a person and developed a more positive self-concept. The women reclaimed the person they had disconnected from while they were in the abusive relationship. Please refer to Table 5 below for a summary of phase IV.

Table 5

Phase IV: Reclaiming self

Paradigm Model	Categories	Subcategories
Context	Rediscovering self	
Conditions	Focusing on self	Healing
Strategies	Making a life of one's own	Moving on
Consequences	Personal growth	Self-reflecting Self-awareness Self-confidence

Context

Rediscovering Self

The context of the fourth phase is **rediscovering self**. This refers to the participants finding out about and developing their own strengths and abilities, interests and enjoyments, which they had been incapable of acknowledging or developing while in their abusive relationship. The participants shared the following:

I laugh a lot; I think my personality has completely changed. I tend to completely speak my mind now, whereas before I didn't. I had put up a wall for a long, long time, that's gone, or pretty well gone. It came down very very slowly. Before everything was for him, everything...everything was about him...everything revolved around him, everything. I don't remember in many many years ever doing anything for myself. Even something as so stupid as having a bath.

I guess just finding myself again. I just found this strength that I hadn't had; this is what I want to wear, this is how I want to look, this is what I want to do, if you don't like it, tough, this is me and this is who I am going to be. It was just that I was out to do this for myself now and that's it... ...and I really think that's how I found out who I was, just spending a lot of time to myself.

Conditions

Focusing on Self

The participants were focusing more of their energy on themselves. All of the participants were used to focusing on their relationship and never paid much attention to themselves. However, now they took the time to find out what was important to them. They took the time to engage in activities that they enjoyed, which made them feel good about themselves. This is expressed in the following comments:

What I did is continued on with my life. I went back to work, I was never out of a job, focused on my career. I focused on trying to get back to what my spirituality means to me. I tried to also get in touch with my inner being and my emotions. I have tried to become more physically active.

I started to do things, silly things, for me. I would go and have my nails done every couple of weeks. I would come home from work and if I didn't feel like cooking, I wouldn't cook, if I didn't want to do the laundry I didn't do the laundry.

A subcategory of **focusing on self** is **healing**.

Healing. While the women were focusing on themselves, they were able to begin to heal from the abusiveness of their partner. **Healing** refers to mending their emotional wounds as well as coming to accept what has happened and move on with their lives. Some of the women participated in meditating practices to calm their soul and to let go of

the pain. As time progressed, the women had the opportunity to deal with the hurt and move on from it. Jane explained that it has taken about five years to really let go of everything:

> It took about five years to really let go of everything and to really realize that okay he has these good qualities and those bad qualities...but he is still my daughters dad and I have to come to terms with that.

Strategies

Making a Life of One's Own

Making a life of one's own refers to the women pursuing their dreams and aspirations. They were building a life separate from their partner. Several of the women chose to go back to school, while others were going after what they wanted for themselves in life. The women were creating new beginnings for themselves. This is illustrated in the following comments:

> I should say that I also made a decision to get on with my life. I am back in school and that was really a hard decision to make. The finances are still there and I don't know where I am going to come up with things but its almost to the point that at least I am doing something, at least I'm evolving.

> It is a new beginning and that's how I am looking at new beginnings for my daughter and my dog and I. New beginnings for our new home; we are going to a new home, we are not just going to move to a basement suite, we are going to find our home. We are going to get our van and we are going to go on a trip around the world...something to look forward to.

A subcategory of **making a life of one's own** is **moving on.**

Moving on. **Moving on** refers to the participants seeking and developing close friendships with others, reestablishing relationships with those with whom they had become distant during the abusive relationship, and finding new intimate partners.

Participants with children also discussed how their children played a huge part in helping

them to move on. Examples of this are shared in the following comments:

> I guess getting into another relationship, which I swore I would never do…it was just a chance meeting and it turned into a great thing and that's helped. And devoting a lot more time to the kids even though they are grown, just participating a lot more.

> My son is a big factor of moving on. My son really helped because no matter how angry I got at his father I can still look at my son and say you know, this happened for a reason and I got something good out of it. He is just the sweetest kid I have ever seen in my whole life… he is my heart and soul.

<div align="center">Consequences</div>

Personal Growth

All of the participants grew from this difficult and complex experience and

continue to grow. They have learned a great deal and have used this learning experience

as a way to develop themselves. Betty spoke of the desire to continuously evolve from

this experience and to do something positive for herself in her life. Elizabeth shared the

following:

> When we were married, he would always tear me down, nothing I did was ever good enough. I lived in fear all the time and you have no idea how much that just constantly wears at you, you feel so helpless, you feel worthless, and controlled. You can't function under that kind of stress and you feel like a non-person. Now I can define myself and because of that I can breathe because I have removed all of that negative influence and negative energy from my life. You start to see the positive so much more and you start to realize, hey I did this and maybe it's pride but it's good, you need to have some sense of self and some self-esteem.

Personal growth consists of the following three subcategories: **self-reflecting,**

self-awareness, and **self-confidence.**

Self-reflecting. The participants have taken the time to reflect on the abusive

relationship and to learn from it. Additionally, they have taken the opportunity to self-

reflect and learn who they are and what they want in life. This is expressed in the following comments:

> When I left these relationships I had lots of time to reflect about who I am and reflect on what I would do and also realize what I do not want anymore and what I am searching for. Also I guess that volition, that will in myself to continue living and make life better for myself and for the future, I guess that was what I was referring to by inner being, that reminder and commitment for the future and the commitment for myself and also the understanding of who I am and why I don't need to be in an abusive relationship and that I deserve something better.

> Finding out who I am and accepting me for who I am. I did not want to get into a relationship right away because I knew chances were I would just choose somebody like him anyway so I had to figure out why I chose the people I chose. I had an opportunity to look at the issues in my life...the opportunity to grow, to get more in touch with myself, understand myself, and accept myself.

Self-awareness. Through this process, the participants have also gained a greater **self-awareness** of who they are. This is illustrated by the words of the participants:

> I am also beginning to know myself and what kind of people I am attracting and why am I attracting them. What do I need to change in myself to stop attracting those types of personalities and knowing who I am and knowing how to use the strength that I have to be able to stand up for myself when I am alone with a guy.

> I also think I have a stronger sense of where I am at today and at this point in my life. I actually just got out of a relationship that lasted only a month. But I now have the awareness of why I was in that relationship...I knew what I wanted and I wasn't going to get what I wanted and I am out and I am still happy... I am going to move on. I guess realizing now where I am at; if I am ready for, or want to be in a long term committed relationship or if I am okay being alone.

Self-confidence. The participants have also gained an increased **self-confidence**. This is illustrated in the following comments:

> It has made me more aware of what I want in terms of future relationships. Now I tell it like it is and tough if you don't like it, this is it, like it or leave it. So I guess it has increased self-confidence and it just adds to life experience.

> I know I deserve a lot better than that and how I treated them and gave them so much and received very little in return...now I know I do deserve a lot better but I wasn't as confident back then as I am now.

Core Category

The core category that emerged from this study was **developing a greater sense of self**. As explained in chapter three, the core category is the central phenomenon or basic social process being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is discovered by continually asking questions regarding connections between the categories.

Developing a Greater Sense of Self

Developing a greater sense of self is the process the women went through while deciding to leave the abusive relationship, acting upon that decision, and then continuing to sustain the decision of separation. Each woman's view of her sense of self clearly changes through her experiences, both within the relationship and leaving and sustaining the decision. As a result of the experience of being abused the women began to disconnect from themselves. Over the long term, the women started to internalize their partner's stated and demonstrated perception of their personal worth and ability. However, while in phase I, the women began to gain awareness of their partner's abusive behaviors and began to develop a greater sense of self. **Developing a greater sense of self** continued through each of the phases.

Developing a greater sense of self consists of reconnecting with the self, gaining inner strength and an increased sense of self-worth, and developing a more positive self-concept. It involves reconnecting to feelings, desires, thoughts, needs, values, and capabilities. It involves a change in self-concept, and an increasing trust in, and valuing the self as it is renewed or newly discovered, which leads to developing new meanings and beliefs about self. The women began participating in activities and pursuing interests, as well as taking responsibility for their self and their life. The women developed new

boundaries for the self and developed the capacity for asserting themselves in relation to acceptable or unacceptable treatment or behaviors.

Movement from one phase to the next was dependent on the presence of **developing a greater sense of self**. For example, before the women could move from phase I to phase II, they had to begin **developing a greater sense of self** in order to gain the strength to leave the abusive relationship. Once they left the abusive relationship they were able to continue to develop and grow. They continued to learn more about themselves and pursue the life they wanted for themselves. Thus, they continued to gain a stronger sense of self. This process is captured in the words of two participants.

As Living shared the following:

> When I was in the relationships I was codependent on the other and looking at their needs as priority over mine... I am now putting myself first...I see a growth in me and not only me but my friends and my mentor also see the growth in me. I am aware of where I am at and how I feel...there is definitely a change in me, a self-realization of where I am at, what I want...I am true to myself, aware of where I am at and what I want...I wasn't there at those times, I wasn't there before...it took me awhile to get where I am and I am very happy about it and comfortable about it and I am okay with it and I feel it is a good place to be.

Elizabeth commented her experience:

> For me it's a boundaries issue; there is physical boundaries like fences and divisions between countries and in a healthy relationship you still have kind of a fence around your self. Some boundaries, some lines that you are not allowed to cross and you will defend. When you end up in an abusive relationship that person is constantly attacking those values and those boundaries that you have set and they start to crumble and they attack you. When you can begin to define yourself, when you can set up those boundaries again and say no I won't stand for that anymore, you learn a lot about yourself and you can define yourself and you grow so much. You learn so much from the situation, you just come out so much bigger and stronger and better then you were when you went in because you know now if somebody does this to you you're not going to put up with it.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the grounded theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The four phases were discussed and comments given from the participants were included. Additionally, the core category was described and related to the theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter outlines the theory of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship and compares the current theory with existing literature. Specifically, the theoretical model is compared to the literature on a model of change and a transition framework. The study's major findings and factors that enabled the women to sustain the separation are compared to the abuse literature on leaving and staying away. Lastly, the core category is briefly described and is related to supporting literature. The chapter concludes with implications for counselling, limitations and delimitations of the study, followed by considerations for future research.

Specific Aims

Researchers have only begun to explore the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. There has been a great deal of research investigating the reasons women stay in abusive relationships, the process of leaving, and the immediate aftermath. However, research examining the process involved when women sustain the separation is limited. Seven women were interviewed in order to develop a theoretical model utilizing grounded theory methodology. This study expands upon the limited research that has been completed in this area and offers a framework for understanding the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship.

Specifically, this study consisted of generating a theoretical framework for understanding the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. An additional aim of the study was to gain a greater comprehension of the

factors that have been helpful to these women during this process. The research questions used to guide the study focused on the experiences of sustaining the separation for women who had left an abusive relationship. The following are examples of specific questions that all of the women were asked. How are you able to sustain your decision to leave? What helped you to take these steps? And what has this experience of separation been like for you? (See Appendix D for the interview guide)

Support for the Theoretical Model

Transtheoretical Model of Change

James Prochaska and colleagues have developed a model referred to as the "Stages of Change" (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). They explain that most people's efforts to make change in their lives follow a typical pattern. People seem to go through a series of stages in the process of making change. Prochaska and colleagues perceive that people often progress through five stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. People generally recycle through these stages numerous times (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992).

Precontemplation is the stage where people do not have any actual intention to change in the near future. A person might have a vague sense that something needs to be done, but there is no actual commitment to change. Individuals in this stage might not actually be aware of a problem (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). Precontemplation is comparable to the beginning phase of this study, **disempowerment of self.** They are similar in the sense that the participants in this study felt dissatisfied with their relationship and had a vague sense that something needed to be done, but they had not

made any commitment to change the situation. The difference is that the participants in this study had also moved into the contemplation stage during phase I.

Contemplation is the stage where people are aware that they have a problem and are seriously considering change; however, they have not made any commitment to take action. Individuals may stay in this stage for a long period (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). Similarly, during phase I the participants of the current study began to **assess the situation** and **gained awareness** that there was a serious problem and considered making an attempt to change.

Preparation is the stage where people are making the decision to change but have not yet fully committed to change. They have the intention to take action immediately and have begun to demonstrate small behavioral changes (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). The preparation stage is comparable to phase II of this study, **empowering the self**. The participants in this study were **letting go of the relationship, gaining strength, seeking support,** and **planning** to leave the relationship. Again, the difference is that the women in the present study moved into the action stage during phase II. Action is the stage where people actually begin to change or alter their behaviors or their environment in order to make change in their lives or overcome a problem. Action entails making change and necessitates a substantial commitment of time and energy (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). In phase II, the women in this study left their abusive partner.

During phase III of this study, **regaining self**, the women continued to take action by modifying their behavior and their environment in an attempt to overcome their problems. All of the participants went through a **transition** period, which consisted of moving to a different residence and starting a life without their partner. The maintenance

stage began at the end of phase III for these women. Maintenance is the stage where people work to prevent a relapse. It is a continuance of the change process. For a number of behaviors, it might involve a lifetime of attention (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). In phase III, the women were **regaining control** of their lives and were reaffirming the decision they had made.

The maintenance stage is also comparable to phase IV of this study, **reclaiming self.** The women were **focusing on self, healing,** and continuing to develop themselves as women. The women in this study also began to **make a life of their own** and **move on** with their lives. During this phase, the women in this study were strengthening and maintaining the changes they had made.

Although there are some similarities between both of these models, there is an apparent difference. The transtheoretical model of change consists of five stages, whereas the present theory consists of four phases. However, some of the stages of the transtheoretical model overlap with phases of the current study. For instance, the action stage of the transtheoretical model is comparable to the end of phase II, as well as the beginning of phase III in the present study.

Bridge's Transition Framework

William Bridges developed a transition framework that encompasses the three following processes: endings, neutral zones, and beginnings (Scholossberg et al., 1995). Endings are the first phase of the transition process, as Bridges states "…every beginning, every transition, starts with an ending" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 38). Endings involve letting go of the old, unlearning, disengaging, and may include periods of disorientation. People disengage by disconnecting from their previous roles and

routines. The endings process, described by Bridges, is comparable to the process the women experienced during the second phase of the current study. During phase II, **empowering the self**, the women were **letting go of the relationship** by **doing more for themselves** and disengaging from their partners. At the end of this phase, the women left their partners and ended the relationship.

A gap or in-betweeness characterizes the neutral zone. Bridges describes this phase as being caught between the previous life and the new life. "During this period, a person is betwixt and between, having left old roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions but not yet in a new life with new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 40). The neutral zone characterizes the experiences of the women in this study during phase III, **regaining self**. During the beginning of this phase, the women experienced a period of **grieving**, a major **transition**, and faced many **challenges**. The women experienced a period of emptiness and had not yet taken on new roles, relationships, routines, or assumptions. It was not until the end of this phase that the women began to move on to what Bridges refers to as beginnings.

New beginnings are experienced when the endings and the phase of neutrality are finished. Beginnings involve new opportunities (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The women in this study experienced new beginnings during phase IV, **reclaiming self**. New beginnings for these women involved **making a life of their own**, **moving on**, gaining a new sense of self, and growing as individuals.

Support for Major Findings

The current theory is comprised of the four following phases: **disempowerment of self, empowering the self, regaining self,** and **reclaiming self**. Each phase consists of

categories and subcategories that are grouped into contexts, conditions, strategies, and consequences. The phases were compared to existing literature in the area of leaving and sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. The following is a discussion of the literature, which supports the findings of the current study.

Leaving as a Process

The participants of this study perceived leaving an abusive relationship as a process rather than as a single event. This is consistent with the previous studies of Landenburger (1989), Limandri (1987), Lockley (1999), Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995), Pilkington (2000), and Ulrich (1991, 1993). For most of the women in this study the process of leaving began long before their actual departure. The women described a process of becoming increasingly more dissatisfied with their partner's behavior. The dissatisfaction led the women to assess their relationship. The women in this study left for a number of reasons including fear of staying, fear for their children, loss of hope for change, desire for something better, triggered event, and positive support from family and friends. Similarly, NiCarthy (1987), Hoff (1990), and Ulrich (1991) all supported these reasons for women leaving abusive relationships.

Additional reasons included: hitting rock bottom, tipping the scales of hope and fear (NiCarthy, 1987), fearing that he would kill her, fearing that she would kill herself, fearing for her family, the shock of a particular beating, being beaten while pregnant (Hoff, 1990), emotional safety of their children, a cognitive change, new knowing, a turning point, dependency, personal limit, and concern for their own potential (Ulrich, 1991). Newman (1993) discovered that the principal reason cited by women for leaving

was for the safety and mental welfare of their children. This was also supported by Moss and colleagues (1997).

The participants of this study also perceived sustaining the separation as a process. The participants in this study experienced a period of **grieving**, endured **challenges**, and made an effort to regain control of their lives. Additionally, they had to make a life of their own separate from their abuser, which entailed **moving on** and creating new beginnings. The process nature of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship is also supported by Kirkwood (1993). She found that instantaneous change did not just occur subsequent to the women leaving. Rather, they experienced a process of emotional, social, and material struggle, which lasted for years.

Disempowerment of Self

During this phase all of the women experienced a loss of self. Their self-esteem and self-efficacy was diminished from constantly being abused by their partner. In Landenburger's (1989) study, she also found that women began to lose themselves, which she termed "shrinking of the self." Kirkwood (1993) discovered that the women in her study felt that their self-esteem had been eroded and they had a weakened sense of identity, which Kirkwood labeled "loss of identity." This is similar to what Merrit-Gray and Wuest (1995) termed "relinquishing parts of self."

The loss of self that was experienced by the women in this study is illustrated in the following poem: (Marecek, 1993, p. 49)

> I can't think anymore
> I used to be able to think.
> I can't cry anymore
> I used to be able to cry.
> I feel empty all the time
> I used to feel filled up.

I'm tired all the time
I used to have energy to spare.
I think everything is all my fault
I used to know that it wasn't.
I don't feel things anymore
I used to feel shocked.
I won't tell myself what I'm feeling
I used to share my feelings with friends.
I'm a stranger to myself
I've lost me.

Within this phase, **disempowerment of self**, the participants in this study had

hoped that things would change and their relationship could continue. This is supported

by the findings of Merrit-Gray and Wuest (1995) who reported that the women had hoped

that the abuse would stop and that they could change their partner. Barnett and LaViolette

(1993) found that a major reason why women persisted in their efforts to alter the

situation is their hope that their abuser will change. Further, Marden and Rice (1995)

identified that women in abusive relationships maintained hope in four major dimensions:

"hope for change in their partner's behavior, hope for survival, hope as something to

cling to, and hope for control of the situation" (p. 70).

In phase I, the women had also assessed their situation, and gathered information

and as a result the women were able to **gain awareness**. With the awareness came the

realization that they had been abused. Comparably, Landenburger (1987) found that the

women began to identify with other women in similar situations in the phase they labeled

"disengaging." This identification occurred through reading stories or through watching

television programs. Subsequent to identifying the abuse these women felt they had a

label for what had been happening to them. Additionally, Merrit-Gray and Wuest (1995)

found that the women in their study began to recognize that they were unable to stop the

abuse. This recognition was critical for women in the process of leaving and reclaiming self. Moss and colleagues (1997) also found that participants in their study came to recognize that their relationships were unhealthy or abusive

Empowering the Self

Within this phase, **empowering the self**, the participants had been **letting go of the relationship** by **doing more for themselves** and **letting go of hope** for the possibility of change or improvement. The following findings offer support for this process. Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) reported that their participants began doing things for themselves, withdrawing emotionally from their partners, and avoiding intimacy. They labeled this process as "breaking free." Moss and colleagues (1997) found that women began to give up hope, which allowed them to refocus their energy on changing themselves rather than their partners. Additionally, Kirkwood (1993) discovered that the women lost hope that they could change the circumstances in their lives that were damaging.

Additionally, within this phase, all of the women experienced a **triggered event** that further clarified the decision to leave. For most of the participants in this study, the **triggered event** was violent in nature and threatened their safety or the safety of their children. This is similar to Landenburger's (1987) study that found that the women experienced a "breaking point." During this "breaking point" the women not only feared for their life but also were fearful that they may attempt to kill their partner. This reflects the experience of one of the participants in the current study who had thoughts of wanting to kill her partner after she endured a severe beating. Likewise, Campbell and colleagues (1998) speak of a "turning point," which was a specific incident or process that was seen

as pivotal to how the relationships were viewed by the women, how the women viewed themselves, or was a major influence in their decision to leave the relationship. They found that the most significant identifiable event was an incidence of abuse by their partner, such as being threatened with death. Additional support was found by Mills (1985), who discovered that the women experienced a specific event that triggered a re-evaluation of the relationship. For most of these women, the specific event was also violent in nature and their safety was threatened.

Participants in this study had talked about **gaining strength**. They began repairing their diminished self-esteem. As they gained strength they were **gaining a voice** and inner strength to stand up for themselves within the relationship. This is supported by the study conducted by Moss and colleagues (1997). Their participants also spoke of gaining a voice, as well as getting stronger, taking control, and fighting back before leaving the relationship. The participants in this study also gained strength after they had left their relationship. This is also supported by Moss and colleagues (1997) who found that some participants also spoke of a new-found attitude about their self-worth, an increased self-esteem, and a greater sense of self subsequent to leaving.

Participants in the current study all completed some form of **planning** prior to leaving the relationship. Some of the participants were organizing where they would live, while others were securing finances. This planning provided a sense of control and facilitated the act of leaving. Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) reported that the women in their study made plans before leaving the relationship. Making plans was found to be a necessary preparation for leaving the relationship and not going back.

Regaining Self

In the current study, each of the participants went through a **grieving** process. They had grieved for the loss of their relationship and they each grieved in various ways. The majority of the participants also experienced anger and frustration that was directed at their partner. Landenburger (1987) found that the participants in her study also went through a grieving process. She found that the grieving process was most acute if a child was involved. Hoff (1990) discovered that the women in her study had to do "grief work." Hoff commented that "grief work" serves a bridging function in a person's passage to building a new life free of violence. The women in her study needed to mourn their losses, which were related to their shattered ideals regarding love, marriage, intimacy, and the family. Hoff found that most of the women also had feelings of anger against the violent partner. The participants in Kirkwood's (1993) study also grieved the loss of the relationship. Furthermore, they felt extreme anger over the fact that they had been subjected to abuse and were angry over the current circumstances they were experiencing as a result of leaving their partner. In contrast, Wuest (1999) reported that grieving for the loss of the relationship or their partner did not play a central role for the women in her study; however, these women did grieve over lost dreams, hopes, material possessions, and their sense of self.

Subsequent to leaving the relationship, the women in this study experienced a **transition**. It consisted of the women moving to new residence or moving in with someone they knew. Wuest (1999) revealed that the process of not going back involved two subprocesses that have been labeled claiming and maintaining territory and relentless justifying. Claiming and maintaining territory is the process of establishing and

maintaining a safe place of one's own, which is similar to the **transition** the women in the current study experienced.

In this study, **financial hardships** had been, and continued to be for some, a challenge. Some of the women had difficulty supporting themselves and their children without the financial support from their partner. At the time of the interview, two of the participants with children were still not receiving child support payments and therefore continue to struggle to make ends meet. Landenburger's (1987) found that barriers such as a lack of employment and financial stability continued to be a reality for the women.

Safety concerns were an issue for some of the participants subsequent to leaving the relationship. For some of these women, **safety** concerns for their children continue to be a concern. These findings have also been reported by Moss and colleagues (1997). In their study the women explained that successful termination might be a myth, especially if children were involved. These women were still harassed by their partners, continued to fear for their children's safety, and continued to have contact with their ex-partner because of the children. Moss and colleagues named this phase, "it's never over." Additionally, Wuest (1999) found that the participants of her study feared harm to their children by their ex-partner.

Near the end of phase III, the participants of this study were **regaining control**. As they regained control they also regained the freedom they previously did not have. They were able to make decisions on their own and pursue the life they wanted. Similarly, Wuest (1999) found that claiming and maintaining territory involved two strategic processes of gaining control and getting situated. In gaining control, the women

began to take charge of their destiny separate from the abuser. The women gained an

enhanced sense of self and competencies, which aided them in gaining control.

The following is a poem that captures the essence of **regaining self**, subsequent to

leaving an abusive relationship: (Hoff, 1990, p. 181)

Life begins again!
I still have clouds of depression
But they are shorter and less intense
Replaced by elated moments,
Sheer joy to be young, healthy, Free!
Free to see the beauty and subtle color in a bleak cold winter's day.
Free to dance, to laugh, to sing, to ski, to paint, to sleep!
Free to form new relationships
Free to love again.
Free to explore, to learn who I am.
I am becoming who I want to be.
Life is opening new doors and now I hold the key!
Sometimes I make mistakes, take the wrong path.
But I'm just exploring, soon I find my way again and I'm humbled by my errors.
There is no cage I set myself free!
It's a little frightening just yet.
In a cage I was safe from the outside, But not from my insides.
There are no fences to protect me or limit me now.
Which way should I go?
Which path to follow, I will try to be brave,
Remain open
Explore as many paths as possible that I can seek out.
I like the emerging ME!

Reclaiming Self

My eyes are open. I will not close them again, look away, or deny what is right in
front of me. I am conscious. I will not distill the truth and spin it so it no longer
shames me. No longer crippled by my wish for a happily ever after or deluded by
my self-deceit, I see what is there.
I have won because I have won myself back.
I claim me.
(Weldon, 1999, p. xviii).

Reclaiming self consisted of the participants moving on with their life and

learning from their past relationship. Each of the participants grew as individuals and

developed a more positive self-concept. They reclaimed the person they had disconnected from while they were in the abusive relationship. Reclaiming self was found to be the emerging central social process in Merritt-Gray and Wuest's (1995) study in counteracting abuse and breaking free. It was also found to be the central social psychological process for a woman leaving and not returning to an abusive relationship living in a rural area (Wuest, 1999).

Landenburger (1987) reported that the self begins to reemerge at different points in the relationship but is often pushed down or negated. She found that once the women had left the relationship, they began to reclaim their self-back and to feel human again. Similarly, Kirkwood (1993) discovered that subsequent to the women leaving their partners, they had become aware of their own needs, whereas previously they focused on the needs and wishes of their abusers. The most dramatic and liberating changes that occurred after leaving their partners included an emerging sense of identity and self-esteem.

Within this phase, each of the women in the current study began to make a life of their own by moving on with life. Moss and colleagues (1997) labeled this phase as "going on." This phase occurred after the relationship was ended and consisted of the restructuring and recovering activities necessary to rebuild a life without the abuser.

Most of the women in this study were also making future plans for themselves and for their children. Similarly, Wuest (1999) found that the participants in her study were creating a plan for the future, which increased their sense of control by focusing their energies on mapping out a direction for their future existence.

The majority of the women in the present study spent time reflecting on their experiences and were able to learn from them. Similarly, Landenburger (1989) found that women began "searching for meaning" subsequent to leaving their relationship. The women were asking themselves questions, such as, "Why did I stay?" and "Will I become involved in another abusive relationship?" Some of the participants in the current study asked themselves these exact questions. As mentioned previously, all of the women in this study grew as individuals from their experience. This **personal growth** or self-growth has been supported by the studies of Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) and Ulrich (1991, 1993).

<div align="center">Factors Enabling Women to Sustain the Separation</div>

Seeking Support

The findings of this study illustrate that support was not only an important factor while women were in the process of leaving, but it was also found to be extremely important in the process of sustaining the separation. This is consistent with the findings of Wuest (1999) where women specified that although helper support during the initial leaving process is crucial, the process of sustaining the separation requires even further support.

The women in this study sought support from formal and informal networks a number of times throughout the different phases of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. All of the women in this study sought the most help from family and friends. This is consistent with findings from Kelly (1996) who found that relatives and friends, particularly female ones, were the main sources of immediate and long-term

support for the women. Previous research also has identified the use of friends and family as help sources (Rounsaville, 1978; Bowker, 1983).

Support can either facilitate or hinder women's efforts in leaving an abusive relationship and sustaining the separation (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Hoff, 1990; Landenburger, 1989; Merritt-Gray, 1995; Wuest, 1999). All of the participants in this study, except for one, received positive responses when seeking support, which facilitated their efforts. One of the participants, Elizabeth, received negative support from her bishop when she was thinking about leaving her abusive partner. The bishop's advice to stay in the relationship severely hindered the process of leaving for Elizabeth and placed her and her child's safety at risk.

In Landenburger's (1987) study, the participants sought support through various channels. However, it was found that these women were often turned down or disbelieved by family members, friends, police, and their church. Therefore these women had to turn to new sources. Hoff (1990) found the response from informal networks to be more positive than support from formal networks.

Following is a poem written by a woman who had left an abusive relationship and was seeking support: (Marecek, 1993, p. 81)

<div align="center">

listen
if you will help me...
hear my voice, listen to my words, my heart
my unspoken shame, my nameless dreams
listen
please do not give me your
opinions, judgments, advice, wisdom
listen
to my silence, my terror, my fears, my anxiety, my pain
and please do not interrupt while I am sharing my being
my past, my present, my future
if you will help me...

</div>

> hear my voice
> listen.

Faith and Spirituality

Many of the women in this study turned to their **faith and spirituality** subsequent to leaving their abusive partner. Some of the women returned to church, while others reconnected with their spirituality. This seemed to be an important part of **reclaiming self** for these women. Unfortunately, I was unable to find support for this in the existing literature in the area of leaving abusive relationships and sustaining the separation. However, it was an important concept in phase III of this study for the majority of the women.

Letting go of the relationship

Each of the women let go of the relationship to a certain degree prior to leaving. While **letting go of the relationship** they began **doing more for themselves** and **letting go of hope**. This process seemed to be crucial in leaving and sustaining the separation for these women.

Some of the women completely let go of the attachment to their partner. These participants were clear about not going back to the partner who abused them. Thus, it seems that the women who had never thought about returning had broken the attachment some time before they actually left. For instance, Zelda did not think about returning because she had let go of the relationship long before she actually left the relationship. These findings are comparable to Hoff (1990) who found that some women were not tempted to return to the relationship because they had broken the attachment before they actually left.

Self-Help

All of the women in this study were rediscovering themselves and allowing themselves to heal from the abusive relationship. They began to accept themselves and their decision to leave. The women in this study talked about **reaffirming their decision,** through engaging in self-talk. All of the women were helping themselves to heal from the experience and were engaging in self-reflection. Similarly, Hoff (1990) found that the participants in her study discovered ways to talk to themselves or think about their lives in a way that helped them combat their loneliness, discouragement, and depression. Most of these women found it necessary to slow down and take a good look at what they had been through.

Moving On With One's Life

The women in this study made a life of their own. They began to pursue the life and dreams they desired. A majority of the participants went back to school and began new relationships with friends and new partners. Hoff (1990) revealed that several of the women found men to be helpful, either as dates, sexual partners, friends or new partners. Most of the women who had formed new relationships were able to find partners who treated them well. This is also true of the women in the current study. Hoff (1990) found that not all of the women wanted to pursue another relationship. Some wanted to wait and pursue their own autonomy, while others thought they could not trust their own judgment.

<div align="center">Support for the Core Category</div>

The core category, **developing a greater sense of self,** illustrates an essential process of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. Each of the

participants were developing and growing throughout each of the four phases. Before the women left their abusive partner, they had developed a stronger sense of their selves and they continued to develop themselves as they sustained the separation. The women began participating in activities, pursing interests, reconnecting relationships, and taking responsibility for themselves and their own life. They were connecting with their feelings, thoughts, values, and wants.

The experience of **developing a greater sense of self** is also recognized in other literature on leaving abusive relationships. Landenburger (1989, 1993) and Ulrich (1991) found that a woman's sense of self tends to change over time while in the abusive relationship, which enables them to leave the abusive relationship. For example, a woman's sense of self begins to emerge at different points in the abusive relationship, and during the third stage called "disengagement," the self becomes stronger (Landenburger, 1989). Similarly, Ulrich (1991) found that personal growth was a major contributor to the women's decision to leave.

Additionally, the core category was compared to extant literature in additional areas to offer support for its use in this study. The core category was compared to the following literature: recovery from illness and trauma and recovery from an eating disorder.

Recovery From Illness and Trauma

There are several aspects and forms of suffering that confront women during illness and trauma. Every acute or chronic assault on normal life is a threat to the self. There is a threat to the identities they have built, the bodies they move in, skills and roles

they have acquired, histories and relationships nurtured, and pleasures enjoyed (Kearney, 1999).

In her book *Understanding Women's Recovery From Illness and Trauma*, Kearney (1999) developed a map of women's illness and recovery. This map involves five phases. During the second phase, "suffering," women feel the emotional impact of loss to self in past, present, and future and they experience the emotional impact of changes to themselves. In the fourth phase, "reconciling," the women make peace with the illness and reclaim their individuality and self-direction that is part of their sense of self. This may begin by reconnecting with the body. These women come to accept and love themselves. Personal growth can also result as the women go through this phase. Reconciliation with illness brings increased awareness of one's uniqueness, strengths, and life priorities. It motivates women to restructure their goals and develop validating relationships, and find a voice to advocate for themselves. In the last phase, "normalizing," the women begin to rebuild their lives around their changed priorities and new sense of self (Kearney, 1999). These three phases lends support to the core category of the present study, **developing a greater sense of self**. The women in the present study felt a loss of self that is similar to Kearney's "suffering" phase. However, parallel to the phases of "reconciling" and "normalizing" the women in the current study developed a stronger sense of self and began rebuilding their lives with this new sense of self.

Draucker (1991) interviewed women who had been incest victims and had made substantial progress toward healing. These women spoke of needing to "construct a personal residence" for themselves. This included constructing a safe and personally satisfying life for themselves in a process that resembled designing and building a new

house. This process of change is reflected in their movement from criticism and self-neglect to self-acceptance and caring. Likewise, the women in the present study built a new relationship with the self, which is termed, **developing a greater sense of self.**

Recovering From an Eating Disorder

In her book, *The Secret Language of Eating Disorders*, Claude-Pierre (1997) developed the "Montreux Life Wellness scale." This scale encompasses five stages that eating disorder clients experience as they work towards recovery. During the "emergent stage," the women begin searching for their sense of self. During this stage, the women begin to develop a sense of self. The women begin to create their own identity within a safe structure and support from their counsellors. They begin to evolve and emerge. In the "reality stage," the women continue to develop and to pursue activities they enjoy. As this stage progresses, the women's confidence increases. This is a time when positive self-esteem develops, as well as an acceptance of who one is. One of the clients expressed the following, which illustrates her emerging sense of self:

> Look at me now. I'm so proud of myself and the person I've become. This feeling is amazing. The person I've become, or should I say, the person that was never let out is also amazing. I feel so energetic inside. I'm more outgoing and less self-conscious or worried about what everyone else will think of me (p. 161).

Women in the process of recovery discover their actual, potential self, what some might call their true self. They achieve what humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow referred to as "self-actualization." This process of developing a secure sense of self is very similar to the process that each of the participants in this study underwent.

Counselling Implications

The enhanced understanding regarding the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship has the possibility for impacting the practice of

counsellors. The results of this study offer insight to counsellors who are working with clients who are in the process of sustaining the separation. It provides a further look into the process and may provide counsellors with a greater understanding. Furthermore, counsellors can use this knowledge to reassure women who are going through this process that they are not the only ones to have these experiences. The present findings help to explain what counsellors can expect when women sustain the separation from an abusive relationship.

Below is a discussion on implications for counsellors based on the interviews from seven women who participated in this study. Additionally, implications for group work, preventative work, and counsellor training are discussed.

Sustaining the Separation as a Process

The results of this study can significantly sensitize counsellors to the experiences of these women as they sustain the separation from an abusive relationship. These findings exemplify that not only is leaving an abusive relationship a process, but sustaining the separation is a process as well. Furthermore, the results of this study highlight the gradual and continuing nature of this process. It is important for counsellors to be aware of where the woman is at in terms of this process. The woman will need different forms of support depending upon the phase she is in. Presented below are the four phases of this study and implications for counsellors while working with women in the various phases.

Disempowerment of Self

The women in this phase experienced a loss of self. Thus, counsellors need to work with these women on rebuilding self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence, and a

more positive self-concept. Additionally, the women expressed that they were dissatisfied with their relationship. However, the majority of the women were hoping that the relationship could improve and many had difficulty identifying the abuse in the relationship. Clients in this phase need to be educated on the various forms of abuse. Many of the women who were being emotionally, psychologically, and verbally abused could not identify the treatment as abuse. Therefore, women need to be informed that what they are experiencing is abuse in order for them to move forward in the process of leaving.

Empowering the Self

During this phase the women began to let go of the relationship by letting go of hope and doing more for themselves. They gained strength and experienced a readiness to leave the relationship. The women often completed some form of planning. Counsellors can help to facilitate women in this process through continuing to work on their self-development and by linking these women to the necessary resources.

Self-development. All of the participants in this study began developing their sense of self and rebuilding their diminished self-esteem. It is important for counsellors to work with these women to foster their sense of self, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Additionally, it is important to facilitate self-development in the area of personal strengths, needs, and goals in order to facilitate personal growth.

Resources. Counsellors may have to act as advocates for these women or be able to link them up with necessary resources, such as financial aid, housing, childcare, transportation, legal aid, and police protection. As well, counsellors need to be able to assist these women in learning how to make the resources work for them.

Leaving the relationship. All of the women left the relationship during this phase. It is central to continue to give these women support during this time. Leaving takes tremendous courage and strength. Furthermore, it is important for counsellors to provide feedback on their accomplishment and promote their feelings of adequacy. It is also important to mention here that it is essential to continue to safety plan with these women during and after the actual leaving. This is consistent with findings from previous literature that found that the woman's leaving the relationship may be directly associated with an escalation of violence, even to the point of lethality (Berk, Newton & Berk, 1986; Browne, 1987; Dutton-Douglas & Dionne, 1991; Kelly, 1996).

Some of the women in this study returned to their partner subsequent to leaving them. However, these women did eventually leave and sustained the separation. The findings underscore the danger of placing unrealistic expectations, judgments, and labels on women who choose to return. It is important for counsellors to view these patterns as a step in the process of leaving abusive situations.

Regaining Self

The participants in this study experienced a process of grieving subsequent to leaving their partner. It was an extremely difficult and emotional time for these women. Since abused women are highly vulnerable during this time, inadequate support may be detrimental to the women. Counsellors need to acknowledge and normalize the emotional work and pain that arises for women during the process of grieving. Counsellors need to nurture confidence by reaffirming the women's judgments and abilities. Moreover, many of the women in this study felt extreme anger towards their partners. Therefore,

counsellors may need to do some anger work with clients in order for them to move through the anger and continue on with their lives.

Reclaiming Self

During this phase, all of the women began focusing on themselves and were making a life of their own. These women developed a new-found confidence and sense of self. Additionally, the women felt it was important that they continue to develop and grow as individuals. Counsellors can facilitate women through working on personal meanings and goals in their life.

Summary

Women who are in the process of sustaining their decision benefit from support, empathy, and understanding. Such responses can validate them wherever they may be in their own process. Furthermore, the acceptance and patience necessary to support women as they progress through this process is fundamental. It may be tempting for some counsellors to provide advice regarding what they should be doing. However, it is important to bear in mind that the women succeed in sustaining the separation because they are empowered to do it for themselves. They have gained a greater sense of self, which has moved them onward toward further development of their own potential, and they are now living healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.

Safe Environment

All of the participants expressed their need to talk about their experiences of living in, leaving, and sustaining the separation. The participants agreed that they were seeking a safe, accepting environment, and a person to whom they could tell their story. Most of the participants in this study confided in and found support in telling their stories

to friends and family. Furthermore, counsellors can play a critical role in supporting women in this process.

Providing unconditional acceptance can create opportunities for women to explore and clarify personal meanings, priorities, hopes, wishes, and plans for change. Therefore, it is vital that counsellors show an openness to listen without judging. Counsellors who attempt to intervene by pushing their own agenda for change may convey the message that they are judging the person, or expecting them to take action, thus failing to provide a safe climate.

Group Work

All of the women in this study expressed that they felt alone during this process. During the second interview when I showed them the emerging theory, each of the women were relieved that others had shared this experience. This exemplifies the importance of group work. If the women were in a support group they may have felt less alone because women have an opportunity to share with other women who have had similar experiences. Group therapy can also provide a safe place for women to share their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and fears and receive support from nonjudgmental women who understand. The women in this study relied heavily on their informal networks for support. Therefore self-help groups can be valuable for enhancing the women's informal support networks.

Preventative Work

The majority of the women in this study were well educated; however, many of them were unaware that they were being abused. They had difficulty identifying abuse from normal behavior. Thus, additional education and programs are warranted. Programs

that include information and education about abuse and its impact would be beneficial. Programs that focus on healthy relationship skills may also be valuable to women in differentiating between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Counsellor Training

Many of the women in this study spoke to a counsellor about their experiences. Counsellors can either facilitate or impede women during their process; therefore, it is imperative that counsellors be sensitive to the needs of these women. Counsellors who work with these women need to be knowledgeable about what these women experience and how to help support them in their efforts.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study adds further understanding to the process involved in sustaining the separation, caution should be employed when considering the results of this present study. The following section outlines the limitations of the study, as well as the delimitations that were put in place by the researcher.

As discussed in chapter 3, participant demographics revealed considerable variation between participants in terms of age, length of time in an abusive relationship, length of time since leaving their abusive relationship, and whether or not they had any children. The diversities between participants contributed strongly to the process of theoretical sampling. However, the participants were homogeneous on two significant characteristics: they were all relatively well educated and committed to further self-development, and they were all heterosexual. This homogeneity of the participants may limit the research findings by considering only educated and heterosexual women who leave and sustain the separation from abusive partners.

Furthermore, the following consideration must be thought of when looking at the findings of this study. Firstly, women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds were underrepresented, as well as women from low socioeconomic strata. Therefore, caution must be taken when transferring the findings to other populations of women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from low socioeconomic strata.

Secondly, the majority of women in this study permanently ended the relationship subsequent to leaving the first time. This is different than the findings from the literature and previous studies that have discovered that it is common for women to attempt to leave her abuser several times before the relationship is permanently ended (Felder & Victor, 1996; Lockley, 1999; Martin et al., 2000; Sullivan & Davidson, 1991).

Thirdly, all of the women in this study received considerable support from their friends and family. All of the participants received emotional support and some of the participants received financial support as well. All of the participants shared that this support was a significant factor in helping them sustain the separation. Women who do not have this support may have a different experience than the women in this study.

Lastly, all of the women in this study had a good sense of who they were prior to entering the abusive relationship. The women experienced a loss of self while in the abusive relationship. However, all of the women were able to develop a greater sense of self, which ultimately led them to leave the relationship and sustain the separation. Thus, one must exercise caution when transferring the findings to women who may not have a strong sense of self prior to getting involved in an abusive relationship or to those women who may have experienced an abusive childhood or other trauma before becoming involved in an abusive relationship.

As delineated by Glaser (1978, 1992) a sufficient theoretical sample is judged on the criteria of how widely and diversely the researcher chose the groups for saturating categories. Therefore, a sample with more diversity would have been preferred. The results of this study ought to be taken as unique in relation to its context, participants, and researcher.

Delimitations of the Study

I placed the three following criteria on the women I sought for participation. Firstly, the women were required to be eighteen years of age or older. Secondly, they must have been abused by a partner whom they shared an intimate relationship. Lastly, the relationship ought to have been over for twelve months or longer at the time of the interview. These criteria were put in place in order to fulfill the aims of this study. Furthermore, the researcher chose not to interview women under the age of eighteen due to ethical considerations. The researcher also wanted to focus on adult women; as a result men were not chosen to participate.

The researcher recruited participants for this study by word of mouth, through posters placed across the University of Calgary campus, and at various supportive agencies in the community. Therefore, women who did not have contact with the above mentioned locations would not have had an opportunity to participate.

Considerations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore a phenomenon about which very little empirical evidence exists. This study provides further understanding regarding the process of sustaining the separation. However, further research in this area is still needed. The following section outlines some considerations for future research.

The participants in this study were homogeneous in their sexual orientation and their level of education. In addition, women with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds were underrepresented. As well, the participants were all under the age of fifty. Therefore, the study of a more heterogeneous group of participants may provide further knowledge and understanding of the process. The core category of developing a greater sense of self might also be further developed by conducting research on lesbian women who are sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship, as well as on men who are sustaining the separation.

All of the women I interviewed for this study identified support from family and friends as a helpful factor in their decision to sustain the separation from an abusive relationship. Additional research is required to comprehend precisely what role informal social support plays and how counsellors can enhance women's social support networks. Further, all of the women identified factors that have facilitated or hindered their process in sustaining the separation. Therefore, additional research that has a specific focus on factors that facilitate or hinder the women in the process of sustaining the separation is necessary.

In the process of **reclaiming self**, the participants in this study spoke of **rediscovering themselves**, which led to **personal growth**. Further research is warranted to investigate interventions that helped women rediscover themselves again, which enabled them to pursue a healthy lifestyle free from abuse.

Chapter Summary

This chapter compared the theory of sustaining the separation that was developed from the interviews of seven women with existing literature. The theoretical model

offered a framework for understanding the process involved in sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. Support was provided for the major findings of this study as well as the core category. Counselling implications that were found based on the findings of this study were presented. The limitations and delimitations of the study were described, followed by a discussion regarding considerations for future research.

Concluding Remarks

This study provided further understanding into women's experiences of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship and contributes valuable and useful knowledge to the current literature. The detailed interviews from the seven participants provided insight into the process involved in sustaining their decision. This study also has practical application for women contemplating or going through this experience, as well as for professionals who are in a position to facilitate women in this process.

Four phases of sustaining the separation emerged from the results of this study. These phases consisted of the following; **disempowerment of self, empowering the self, regaining self,** and **reclaiming self.** The core category that emerged from the interviews with seven women was **developing a greater sense of self.** The process of **developing a greater sense of self** involved the participants gaining a greater sense of themselves, learning more about themselves, reconnecting with relationships, and gaining a more positive self-concept. The core category, **developing a greater sense of self,** connected the four phases and facilitated movement from one phase to the next. It is important to emphasize that although the phases were presented in a linear fashion, in actuality movement into and out of the phases occurred in a non-linear fashion.

The findings of this study suggest that sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship is a process; just as leaving an abusive relationship was found to be a process. Although there are numerous challenges faced by women who are leaving and sustaining the separation, there are numerous benefits and rewards. Each of the participant's spoke of regaining a sense of self and gaining a life they had always wanted.

The participants discussed factors that enabled them to sustain the separation, such as **seeking support**, their **faith and spirituality, letting go of the relationship,** self-help, and moving on with their lives. All of the women grew personally and developed a greater sense of self. All of the women in the study were able to leave their abusive relationship safely and sustain their decision in a safe and rewarding way. They all grew as women and continue to strive to grow and enjoy their present life. Although the effort to sustain the separation does not appear to be a lifetime endeavor, it does require much needed inner strength. At the time of the interviews, all of the women were in phase IV, **reclaiming self**, and were continuing to develop themselves as women.

At the end of the second interview, the researcher expressed to each of the participants that any other supporting materials such a poem or a journal entry would be welcomed. This was requested in order to further illustrate and capture the experience of the women in this study. One of the participants shared with me the following poem that she had written:

Living....

In a place where the trees sang
The flowers danced wildly
The river roared with laugher
And the rocks watched silently
Bang! The only stars that I saw were whirling in a circle in the sky
What happened to those trees?
Ack! A thin jungle rope was made into a necklace and it was given to me
Where are the flowers?
I didn't want that gift and yelled out for my friend, Prote to come see my present.
I saw another flash of light, aack, what is that flesh that turned so hard
Was it the rock?
Pound, pound, pound, pound. Prote where are you?
The river was not laughing anymore.
Some people call this love for better or for worse
On the cold, hard bed, the man who said he loved me was tightening that necklace
His hand then his bare foot go up, up and down, up and down

Prote? The night sky was nowhere to be found
It stole my spirit and ran away with it
I tasted the water of my soul, I felt mountains within my body
Atop the mountains, the volcanoes spewed lava
Pound, pound, pound, now my head cannot rest
It will be morning soon, the flowers will dance again.

EPILOGUE

Embarking on a qualitative study takes tremendous commitment, time, and passion for the area of research. As a novice researcher undertaking a qualitative study, I was unaware to a certain extent of the many challenges of a qualitative study. I was also unaware of all of the wonderful rewards.

While beginning this research, I was extremely excited to be involved in a qualitative study because all of my previous research endeavors had been quantitative in nature. I was thrilled to be in a department that valued qualitative research. However, subsequent to facing my first few challenges of qualitative research, thoughts surfaced of wishing I had continued with quantitative research. This is because I was familiar with quantitative research and because it seemed like an easier undertaking. Fortunately, the thoughts dissipated quickly.

I continuously questioned my abilities and was filled with uncertainty. I was endlessly asking myself questions, such as "Am I doing this right? "Am I understanding correctly?" "Do I have the theory right?" Through support from my supervisor, I gradually came to the realization that there is really no single correct way to undertake a grounded theory investigation. I gradually learned to trust the process and trust my abilities while undergoing this project.

I continued to have a difficult time with whether or not I had developed a "correct" theory for understanding the process of sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship. Although I came to realize that there is no correct way for developing this either, I still wanted to make sure that I did justice to the women's stories. While in a quantitative study you do not know the participants, I knew these participants,

I developed a rapport with each of them and I wanted to be certain that I was capturing each of their experiences to the best of my abilities.

Meeting with the first participant to show her the developing theory was an extremely nerve wracking experience for me. I was fearful that she would think that I had captured her experience incorrectly. I was relieved to find out that the developing theory captured her experience. I continued to be nervous when meeting with the remaining participants; however, with each remaining participant the experience was great. Each of the women discussed with me how wonderful it was to see their experience on paper and to know that they were not alone. One of the participants began to cry after I explained the theory. When I asked her what her tears were about, she replied that it was just so wonderful to know that she was not alone because for so many years she thought that she was. Each of the participants expressed the benefits they experienced from having been a part of this study. This was so rewarding for me!

Although I faced many challenges being a novice researcher, I am thankful that I chose a qualitative research project. I have found this research project to be tremendously interesting and rewarding. I enjoyed the interviews with each of the participants and I am tremendously thankful to each of the participants for allowing me into their lives to hear their stories. Furthermore, I found this research to be extremely beneficial to me as a counsellor while working with clients who were in an abusive relationship, in the process of leaving, or sustaining the separation. I gained a great deal of knowledge from listening to each of the women's stories and from the existing literature. Additionally, I have learned a lot about my abilities to complete a qualitative study. It was a challenge that I am proud to have accomplished.

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APPENDIX A

Poster

Women over the age of 18 who have

LEFT AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

for at least 12 months
are needed for a research project
examining women's experiences of
sustaining the decision to leave.

Participation will include taking part in
two confidential interviews with the
researcher.

This project is being conducted by a graduate

student in the Division of Applied Psychology

at the University of Calgary.

If interested or for further inquiries please
contact:
Tresa at **286-5410 or**
email teagnew@ucalgary.ca

APPENDIX B

Letter of Information

Research Project Title: Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship: A
Grounded Theory Investigation

Dear _____,

My name is Tresa Agnew and I am a graduate student in the Division of Applied
Psychology at the University of Calgary. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for my
M.Sc. degree, I am conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Judy
Chew. I am writing to provide you with information concerning my research project
*Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship: A Grounded Theory
Investigation.*

This letter of information is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give
you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve.
If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not
included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and
to understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the process that women experience in
sustaining the decision to leave an abusive relationship for a period of twelve months or
longer. I am interested in finding out your experiences involved in sustaining the
separation as well as what you find helpful in strengthening you in this process.

Participation in the study will include two audio recorded interviews. Each of these
interviews will be approximately two hours in length. The confidential interviews will be
conducted between you and myself. The audio recordings will be transcribed and the
transcripts will only be reviewed by you, myself, and my supervisor, Dr. Judy Chew.

After your first interview, you will be asked to review the transcription of our first
interview, to make any corrections, or clarify any information. After you have had two
weeks to review the transcription, a second interview will be arranged. If there is no reply
from you after this time, I will assume that no corrections or clarifications of the
transcription need to be made. The second interview will involve a discussion of what
you would like to correct or add to the information from our first interview and for the
researcher to follow up on areas that may need clarification or elaboration. You will also
be asked for any feedback on the theory of sustaining the decision of leave an abusive
relationship. You can be assured that even if you give your consent to participate you are
free to withdraw from the study at anytime for any reason and without penalty or adverse
ramifications.

Your participation in the study may involve both risks and benefits. The risks may include you experiencing some distress due to disclosing personal issues. If you do experience distress as a result of your participation in this study, you will be advised that the University offers a free, confidential counselling service to all current students. The Counselling and Student Development Centre is located at MacEwan Student Centre, Room 375 and will accept either walk-in or telephone calls (220-5893) to make an intake appointment with a counsellor. If you are not a current University student you will be offered a counselling referral to the Calgary Counselling Centre, located at Suite 200, 940-6 Avenue S.W. Fees at the Calgary Counselling Centre are based on a sliding scale which is determined by income; clients are accepted for counselling regardless of their financial circumstances. You are also free to call the 24 hour Distress Crisis Line at 266-1605 as an additional option.

Data will be collected in such a way as to ensure confidentiality and every reasonable measure will be taken to protect your anonymity. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym during the first interview. One list of pseudonyms cross-referenced with participant names, all copies of the transcripts and copies of the consent form, as well as the audio recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet accessible only to myself. The transcripts will be kept for five years, after which they will be destroyed. After seven years, the audio recordings and the list of pseudonyms cross-referenced with participant names will also be destroyed.

Your signature on the consent form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights or release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

The researcher: Tresa Agnew at (403)286-5410 or teagnew@ucalgary.ca or
The researcher's supervisor: Dr. Judy Chew at (403) 220-4071 or chew@ucalgary.ca

If you have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of this research, you may also contact the Research Services Office at 220-3782 and ask for Mrs. Patricia Evans.

Sincerely,

Tresa Agnew, B.A.
M.Sc. student

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form for Research Participation

<u>Research Project Title:</u> Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship: A
Grounded Theory Investigation

<u>Investigator:</u> Tresa Agnew (M.Sc. student, Division of Applied Psychology, U of C)
<u>Supervisor:</u> Dr. Judy Chew (Counselling and Student Development Centre, U of C)

*This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of
informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and
what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something
mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please
take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.*

I, the undersigned, hereby give my consent to participate in the research project
**Sustaining the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship: A Grounded Theory
Investigation.**

I understand that my participation is <u>voluntary</u>, <u>anonymous</u>, and <u>confidential</u>. My identity
will remain confidential and the information obtained from me will be kept in the strictest
confidence.

The researcher is under legal obligation to report any disclosures of child abuse or risk of
harm to a child who is a minor as well as disclosures of serious harm to self or to others.

I understand that my participation means that I will take part in two audio-recorded
interviews with the researcher, each of which will last approximately two hours. I
understand that I will be asked to discuss my experience of sustaining the decision to
leave an abusive relationship, make additions or corrections to information in the
transcript of my first interview, as well as give feedback on the theory that is being
developed by the researcher. I understand that if after two weeks I fail to respond to make
arrangements for the second interview, it will be assumed that no clarifications or
corrections need to be made to the transcription of the first interview.

I understand that the audio recordings will be transcribed and the transcripts will only be
reviewed by the researcher (Tresa Agnew), and the researcher's supervisor (Dr. Judy
Chew). I understand that the audio tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet
at the researcher's home. The transcripts will be kept for a period of five years, after
which time they will be destroyed. After seven years, the audio recordings will also be
destroyed.

I also understand that although the results of this research may be published and/or
reported to agencies, my identity will be concealed and my name will not be associated,
in any way, with the published results.

I understand that there may be both risks and benefits to my participation in this study. I understand that I may experience some distress due to disclosing personal issues. If I do experience distress as a result of my participation in this study, I will be advised that the University offers a free, confidential counselling service to all current students. The Counselling and Student Development Centre is located at MacEwan Student Centre, Room 375 and will accept either walk-in or telephone calls (220-5893) to make an intake appointment with a counsellor. If I am not a current University student I will be offered a counselling referral from the researcher to the Calgary Counselling Centre, located at Suite 200, 940-6 Avenue S.W. Fees at the Calgary Counselling Centre are based on a sliding scale which is determined by income; I will be accepted for counselling regardless of my financial circumstances. I am also free to call the 24 hour Distress Crisis Line at 266-1605 as an additional option.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study upon my request at any time, for any reason, without penalty or adverse ramifications. This includes after the interviews have taken place. I also may refuse to answer any of the interview questions. At the end of each interview, the researcher will answer any questions or concerns that I may have. Upon completion of the study the researcher will provide me with my own participant copy of the project.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights or release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

The researcher: Tresa Agnew at (403)286-5410 or teagnew@ucalgary.ca or
The researcher's supervisor: Dr. Judy Chew at (403)220-4071 or chew@ucalgary.ca

If you have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of this research, you may also contact the Research Services Office at 220-3782 and ask for Mrs. Patricia Evans.

Participant's Signature _____   Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ .   Date _____

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

▫ Tell me about your decision to leave the abusive relationship you were in.

▫ What lead you to decide to leave? Events surrounding the decision?

▫ How are you able to sustain your decision to leave?

▫ What helped you to take these steps?

▫ What has this experience of separation been like for you?

▫ Did you ever leave and return. Events surrounding returning?

▫ What advice would you have for women who are planning to leave or who have left an abusive relationship?

▫ Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add in order for me to gain a greater understanding of your decision to sustain the separation from an abusive relationship?