LEAVING AN ABUSIVE PARTNER
An Empirical Review of Predictors, the Process of Leaving, and Psychological Well-Being

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Four facets of leaving an abusive relationship are reviewed: (a) factors related to initially leaving an abusive partner; (b) the process of leaving an abusive relationship; (c) the psychological well-being of survivors after leaving; and (d) the predictors of this well-being. The conceptual and methodological limitations of studies in each of these areas are presented. Consistently found predictors of leaving include both material and psychological factors. Because battered women typically undergo several shifts in their thinking about the abuse before leaving permanently, research on leaving as a process is highlighted. A stress-process framework is used to explain the seemingly paradoxical finding that some women just out of the abusive relationship may have greater psychological difficulties than those who are still in it. For those experiencing the most stress, psychological health can worsen over time. Researchers and practitioners need to pay more attention to the plight of women who have left abusive partners.

Key words: *domestic violence, battered women, leaving, psychological well-being*

STUDIES OF BATTERED WOMEN have grown exponentially in number since the discovery or, as some would say, the "rediscovery" of domestic violence in the mid- to late 1970s (Pleck, 1987). Despite this volume of research, little is known about the challenges faced by women who separate from an abusive partner. By various estimates, it appears that many or most women do eventually leave abusive relationships (e.g., L. Okun, 1986; Strube, 1988). Most of the battered women in Lehnen and Skogan's (1981) sample from the National Crime Survey had already divorced or separated from their as-sailants at the time of the survey. A great deal of research has focused on factors related to a woman's decision to leave or stay and the processes involved in arriving at such a decision. However, a woman's need for protection from further abuse, practical assistance, and other forms of intervention do not usually end when she leaves an abusive partner. In fact, such needs are likely to increase. Currently, the overlap between research on battered women and divorce largely remains unchartered territory. Studies on domestic violence have seldom ventured beyond the point of physical separation.

At the same time, woman battering is rarely mentioned in the divorce literature, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Kurz, 1996; Molina, 1999). The present review addresses this gap in the literature by focusing on battered women who have left the assailant and extending the concept of leaving as a process to include the aftermath of the separation.

Our review begins with a brief overview of the theoretical context in which research on battered women's leaving developed. It then turns to studies that focus on factors relating to the decision to leave or return and the processes involved in terminating a relationship with an abusive partner. Finally, the challenges battered women face and their subsequent psychological well-being in the postseparation period are examined from the available, mostly descriptive evidence. These findings are synthesized and interpreted from a stress-process framework to address the seemingly paradoxical question, Why would a substantial proportion of women experience low levels of well-being *after* leaving an abusive mate? We then identify various risk and protective factors influencing a battered woman's psychological well-being after separation.

BACKGROUND

A wide variety of theories have been proposed to explain why women remain with abusive partners. Prior to the 1970s, Freudian notions of female masochism predominated (e.g., Snell, Rosenwald, & Robey, 1964; Young & Gerson, 1991). Battered women were believed to harbor a conscious or unconscious need for pain and punishment, which was used to explain their "provocation" leading to abuse and/or a lack of motivation for leaving. Feminist activists and social scientists challenged these psychodynamic views and helped to construct a new image of the battered woman, one that emphasized gender role

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KEY POINTS OF THE RESEARCH REVIEW

- Predictors of leaving are found consistently in two broad categories: material resources (especially employment and income) and social psychological factors. Income variables were stronger predictors than psychological ones in multivariate studies. A history of childhood abuse and the nature of adult abuse were not consistent predictors of leaving or staying.

- Many survivors go through several phases in the process of leaving. They may leave and return multiple times, each time learning new coping skills. As with divorcing women, these phases may involve cognitive and emotional "leaving" before the physical leaving. The phases include (a) endurance of and managing the violence while disconnecting from self and others; (b) acknowledging the abuse, reframing it, and counteracting it; and (c) "breaking free," disengaging, and focusing on one's own needs. There appears to be a fourth phase following separation that is not addressed by the majority of these studies.

- Trauma effects decline in the months after separation, but a substantial proportion of women continue to suffer from post–traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other traumatic problems. Some groups of abuse survivors experience more traumatic effects and depression right after separation than survivors still in a relationship.

- After separation, continued violence and additional stresses can create a negative spiral, creating worsening psychological outcomes. Preliminary evidence suggests that the presence of various coping resources such as social support, material necessities, and self-efficacy can protect against negative psychological outcomes. Women often have insufficient personal resources and require additional services and support.

conditioning, institutionalized sexism, and external constraints on women's ability to leave.

Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, explanations for why a battered woman does or does not leave were more likely to locate the source of the woman's entrapment outside of her personality. However, the emphasis on internal versus external explanatory factors varied considerably and many theories combined psychological dynamics with external factors. On one end of the continuum are the theories of female masochism mentioned earlier (Shainess, 1979). Next are theories with interpersonal components. These

involve principles such as (a) intermittent reinforcement, which Walker (1984) popularized as the "cycle of violence"; (b) traumatic bonding, which was hypothesized to result from alternating punishment and indulgences (Dutton & Painter, 1981); and (c) fear of greater harm upon separation, which we will show later is a realistic fear for many women. Social learning theory has been applied in studies that investigate whether battered women were likely to have witnessed abuse or been abused in childhood and, perhaps as a result of this abuse, develop beliefs that violence is a normal part of family life. We also provide evidence regarding the impact of these childhood experiences. Learned helplessness theory hypothesized that motivational, cognitive, and affective deficits result when abused women repeatedly but unsuccessfully attempt to get the help they need (Walker, 1984). Closely related are theories of victim blaming and institutional sexism that create apathetic and sometimes hostile responses to battered women when they seek help, leaving them isolated and without resources. On the macro level are patriarchal social structures that tend to keep women as a group economically dependent on men and patriarchal norms about gender roles that women tend to internalize. The above theories are described more fully elsewhere (e.g., Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Kirkwood, 1993; Strube, 1988). In sum, many potential impediments to women's leaving have been described and investigated. As a result of theorizing since the 1970s, battered women are less likely to be described as culpable participants in a "troubled relationship" than victims facing many obstacles restricting their alternatives to leaving an abusive relationship.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH PREDICTING WOMEN'S STAY/LEAVE DECISIONS

Consistent with the background just described, studies on women's decisions to stay or leave began to appear in the mid-1970s. These studies attempted to isolate the reasons for battered women's apparent entrapment in abusive relationships. Additionally, most of these studies have tried to account both for structural constraints on a woman's decision to leave or stay as well as psychological factors. This body of research is important for purposes of the current review inasmuch as it is among the first to shed some light on possible factors influencing the well-being of women who leave. Whereas other recent reviews have included some stay/ leave studies (e.g., Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998), the present review provides a fairly comprehensive assessment of those studies that directly involve the empirical testing of factors hypothesized to predict relationship status (see Table 1).[1]

Before presenting the results of the review, it should be noted that making direct comparisons between studies and resolving discrepant findings among them is made difficult by differences in the types of variables included, sample selection (nonrandom), time of measurement, and the operationalization of independent and dependent variables. Some of the studies are retrospective whereas others are prospective; some base their findings on women's self-reports of "intentions," and others measure actual behavior. The dependent variables in these studies, for example, range from a woman's intentions to leave a violent partner at shelter exit, to her actual leaving/returning to the batterer immediately after exiting a shelter, to her relationship status in the months or years following a separation, during which she may have returned and left several times. Although these outcomes are related (e.g., Rusbult & Martz, 1995), results could vary somewhat depending on which outcome measure is used. Nevertheless, findings that are consistently significant across studies with slightly different outcome variables can be considered more robust. Keeping in mind the various operationalizations of the dependent variables, the outcome variables will generally be referred to as "leaving" for ease of discussion. The most common predictors from these studies can be categorized as (a) the nature of the violence, (b) the woman's life history, (c) social psychological factors, (d) external resources, and (e) previous coping strategies.

TABLE 1   Quantitative Studies of Battered Women's Stay/Leave Decisions

Study	Sample Size	Source of Sample	Design	Dependent Variable	Predictors of Leaving
Aguirre, 1985	312	Residents of 15 battered women's shelters	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave/return at shelter exit	2 of 8 predictors significant (multivariate): Economic independence from husband, and number of decisions made while at shelter
Compton, Michael, Krasavage-Hopkins, Schneiderman, & Bickman, 1989	141	Residents of a YWCA shelter	Cross-sectional	Intentions to live on own, return to abuser, or live with friends/family at shelter exit	6 of (unknown number) predictors significant (multivariate): Batterer unemployed, length of shelter stay, number of years married, years of abuse, number of previous separations, woman has good health
Dalto, 1983	32	Residents of a battered women's shelter	Time 1: interview at shelter Time 2: 6-week follow-up mail survey	Relationship status at follow-up	11 of 27 predictors significant (bivariate): Did not seek medical attention, feminist stance toward battering, negative attitude toward returning, low social pressure to return, time at shelter and looking for housing (2 variables), attributes responsibility for violence to abuser, cause of violence perceived as stable, interpersonal relationships at shelter (2 variables), perceived dissimilarity of role model
Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991	46	Former and current residents of two battered women's shelters (currently battered women were abused for at least 4 years)	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at the time of the data collection	8 of 19 predictors significant (bivariate): Liberal attitudes toward women, self-esteem, does not feel controlled by outside forces, woman employed, ever received counseling, education, incidents of serious bodily harm, attributions for violence external to self
Gelles, 1976	41	Community sample of battered women (obtained from police records, a private social service agency, and from neighboring families in which women had sought no outside intervention)	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at the time of data collection	3 of 6 predictors significant (bivariate): Severity of violence, frequency of violence, woman employed
Gondolf & Fisher, 1988	2,000	Residents of 50 battered women's shelters in Texas	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave/return at shelter exit	12 of 32 predictors significant (multivariate): Batterer not in counseling, own transportation, child care, own income, emergency room care, batterer threatened to harm child, weapons used, child abuse, batterer threatened to kill her, not a racial minority, police not contacted, woman does not abuse alcohol

Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991	130 (44 still actively involved; 86 not involved)	Community sample of battered women recruited through public service announcements, television, radio, and newspaper ads	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	9 of 16 predictors significant (multivariate): Fewer positive aspects of the relationship, negative change in relationship, low family income, less likely to make downward comparisons, partner blamed for abuse, manipulatory attributions for positive behaviors, does not blame self for abuse, frequency of severe abuse, frequency of verbal abuse
Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984	35	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Cross-sectional	Whether woman leaves/returns at shelter exit	6 of 20 predictors significant (multivariate): Woman's age, low severity of violence, frequency of violence, shorter length of battering relationship, victim income, length of shelter stay
Hilbert, Kolia, & VanLeeuwen, 1997	216	Residents of three New Mexico battered women's shelters (87% living with abuser at intake)	Cross-sectional	Whether woman leaves/returns at shelter exit	2 of 4 predictors significant (multivariate): Length of shelter stay, verbal and physical abuse
Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Wu Shortt, 1996	45 (couples)	Community sample of 45 severely abused married women and their batterers (recruited through advertisements & random phone dialing)	Time 1: Initial assessment Time 2: 2-year follow-up	Relationship status at the 2-year follow-up	13 of 34 predictors significant (multivariate): Husband's isolation of wife, husband's degradation of wife, husband's physiological arousal (2 variables), frequency of husband violence, husband negative affect (4 variables), wife marital dissatisfaction, wife defensiveness (2 variables), wife does not use humor to cope with abuse, wife physiological arousal
I. Johnson, 1992	426	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Cross-sectional	Whether woman leaves/returns at shelter exit	2 of 14 predictors significant (bivariate): Woman employed, low severity of violence
Lesser, 1990	58	Former residents of a battered woman's shelter	Cross-sectional	Length of time remained separated from abuser 1 year after shelter stay	9 of (unknown number) predictors significant (multivariate): Social support, length of shelter stay, low attachment to abuser, personal financial independence, low family income, did not witness parental violence, younger women, woman's education, batterer abuses alcohol
Martin et al., 2000	70	Residents of a battered women's shelter	Cross-sectional	Residents' perceived chances of leaving	0 of 3 predictors significant (bivariate).

(continued)

TABLE 1   (continued)

Study	Sample Size	Source of Sample	Design	Dependent Variable	Predictors of Leaving
L. Okun, 1986	300	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Time 1: Intake Time 2: 1 year following exit (outcome form filled out by shelter worker)	Relationship status at 1-year postshelter follow-up (terminated immediately, terminated eventually, did not terminate)	7 of 47 predictors significant (bivariate): Batterer unemployed, woman has greater income than batterer, woman does not take psychoactive medications, number of previous separations, length of separation, batterer's low level of education, batterer's criminal record of violence
Pagelow, 1981	350	Residents of various battered women's shelters and some nonshelter volunteers	Cross-sectional	Length of cohabitation with batterer after first battering incident	2 of 2 major predictors significant (bivariate): Less severe injuries, childhood violence victimization
Rounsaville, 1978	31	Battered women receiving services from an emergency room and a mental health center	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at the time of data collection	5 of 15 predictors significant (bivariate): Severity of abuse (2 variables), fear of being killed, contact with the police, abuse of children by partner
Rusbult & Martz, 1995	100	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Time 1: Shelter intake Time 2: 3 months following exit Time 3: 6 months following exit Time 4: 12 months following exit	Relationship status at 3-, 6-, & 12-month postshelter follow-ups	2 of 3 predictors significant (multivariate): Personal resources (education, income, employment, transportation), investment items (married, duration of relationship, number of children)
Schutte, Malouff, & Doyle, 1988	117	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Cross-sectional	Intentions to return	4 of 7 predictors significant (multivariate): Experienced childhood abuse, woman's education, number of previous separations, number of shelter stays
Snyder & Scheer, 1981	74	Residents of a battered woman's shelter	Time 1: Shelter intake Time 2: 6-10 weeks following exit	Living arrangements at 6-10 week postshelter follow-up	9 of 40 predictors (bivariate): Seeks more than short-term separation, does not seek conjoint marital counseling, unmarried, shorter length of marriage, number of previous separations, woman is not Roman Catholic, length of shelter stay, not intending to return at discharge, separated/divorced from partner at follow-up
Strube & Barbour, 1983	98	Battered women seeking counseling with county attorney's office (All living w/abuser at intake)	Time 1: Initial intake Time 2: 1-18 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up after closing of case (typically 2-3 months after closing)	5 of 10 predictors significant (bivariate): Woman employed, shorter length of relationship, no mention of economic hardship, no mention of love for the partner, partner promised change at Time 1

Strube & Barbour, 1984	251	Battered women seeking counseling w/county attorney's office (All living w/abuser at intake)	Time 1: Intake Time 2: Roughly 2-3 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up contact after closing of case.	8 of 18 predictors significant: (multivariate): Woman employed, shorter length of relationship, no mention of economic hardship, no mention of love for partner, racial minority, somewhere else to go, number of coping strategies used, partner did not make promise to change
Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000[a]	78	Unmarried, female college undergraduates, all of whom had experienced violence in a dating relationship	Time 1: Initial assessment Time 2: Roughly 1 month after initial assessment	Relationship status at the time of the data collection (currently involved vs. left the abusive dating partner)	7 of (unknown number) predictors significant (multivariate): Catholic women, education of woman's mother, low psychological investment in the relationship, dissatisfaction with the relationship (3 variables), shorter length of relationship
Williams, 2000[b]	100	Residents of shelters and support group participants	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at the time of the data collection	1 of 5 predictors significant (multivariate): Self-efficacy for meeting personal needs

a. It should be noted that unlike the rest of the above studies, this one is included in the table even though the research focuses exclusively on "dating relationships." It is cited in the text only with respect to findings relating to psychological investment in the relationship, which was the primary concern of the investigators.

b. Williams (2000) is much more recent than the bulk of the studies in this table and has clearly been influenced by both the stay/leave studies and the process studies described in the next section. Although this study employs a stage theory to conceptualize leaving as a process, it is categorized with the stay/leave studies because it employs a quantitative method for the purpose of predicting women's likelihood of being in or out of the relationship.

The Nature of the Violence

The nature of the violence, usually assessed in terms of frequency and severity, was among the most likely predictors to be investigated. Whereas some perspectives such as learned helplessness (Walker, 1984) or theories of female masochism (Snell et al., 1964) would expect women to be more likely to remain in the relationship as the abuse escalates over time, the studies under review favor the "common sense" hypothesis advanced by Gelles (1976), which holds that battered women will be more likely to leave as the violence increases in its severity and frequency. However, the findings were often quite inconsistent, possibly due to definitional ambiguity of concepts such as "severe" violence and differences in the types of measurement instruments used. The nonsignificant findings in numerous studies (e.g., Gelles, 1976; L. Okun, 1986; Snyder & Scheer, 1981) are likely due to a lack of variation within samples because most of the women experienced high levels of violence. Verbal and emotional abuse was sometimes as good or more accurate than physical abuse in predicting leaving (e.g., Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991; Hilbert, Kolia, & VanLeeuwen, 1997; Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Wu Shortt, 1996).

Several studies hypothesized that women with a greater sense of commitment would be more likely to remain with the abuser compared with women with less commitment.

Woman's History of Other Abuse

A woman's previous experiences with violence as a child or an adult are believed by many to play a key role in her staying with an abusive intimate partner. In particular, factors relating to a woman's childhood history of family violence, either as a witness or victim of abuse, were the most frequently examined—close to three quarters of the studies in Table 1. However, studies finding support for the hypothesized link between childhood history of violence and a greater likelihood of returning were the exceptions (Lesser, 1990). Rusbult and Martz (1995) found a significant relationship at the bivariate level, which disappeared after other factors were controlled (not shown in table). These studies were outnumbered by studies finding that women who witnessed parental violence or who were themselves abused as children, were more likely to leave than their nonvictimized counterparts (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Pagelow, 1981; Schutte, Malouff, & Doyle, 1988). Results from Williams's (2000) study support these findings at the bivariate level only (not shown in table). Finally, the majority of studies that examined the relationship between such childhood history of violence and stay/leave decisions reported no significant findings (e.g., Aguirre, 1985; L. Okun, 1986; Strube & Barbour, 1984). Overall, the findings are inconsistent but violence history may sometimes bolster women's determination to escape the abuse.

Social Psychological Factors

A variety of psychological and social psychological factors were assessed for their predictive ability regarding the stay/leave decision. The most frequently assessed predictor variables in this category, however, were psychological commitment to the relationship and objective indicators of potential commitment. Several studies hypothesized that women with a greater sense of commitment would be more likely to remain with the abuser compared with women with less commitment (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984; Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000). For example, the more she has invested in terms of time, effort, resources, legal ties, or love for her partner, for example, the more compelled she should feel to justify these investments through further efforts to save the relationship. There was a fair amount of support for these hypotheses across the various studies but primarily for subjective measures of commitment. Women who indicated love or positive feelings for the abuser or the relationship (Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984; Truman-Schram et al., 2000) and held traditional religious values/beliefs (Snyder & Scheer, 1981) were more likely to be involved in the relationship at the time of mea-

surement. However, findings were much less likely to be significant when objective indicators such as marital status (2 of 6 studies) and length of the relationship (5 of 10 studies) served as indicators of commitment (e.g., Compton, Michael, Krasavage-Hopkins, Schneiderman, & Bickman, 1989; Martin et al., 2000; L. Okun, 1986; Schutte et al., 1988).

External Resources

In a number of studies, external resources appeared to outweigh subjective factors in predictive ability. In the Strube and Barbour (1984) study, for example, a woman's employment status was a more powerful predictor of staying than a woman's positive feelings about the relationship (e.g., love, partner promised to change). Similarly, in the Lesser (1990) study, feelings of economic dependence and the need for a place to go were mentioned as reasons for returning by only 15% of the women, yet an objective measure of women's income was the best single predictor of women's leaving, controlling for other factors (including life history variables). Other studies report similar findings. Women who were more economically advantaged in terms of employment status and personal income were less psychologically committed and significantly more likely to leave than other women (e.g., Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Schutte et al., 1988) with few exceptions (e.g., Dalto, 1983; Williams, 2000). It may be less disturbing to a woman to believe that she is staying for the positive aspects of the relationship (i.e., voluntarily) rather than for negative reasons, such as economic entrapment.

Income variables were not only among the most consistently related but possibly the most powerful predictors of the stay/leave decision overall, even when controlling for a variety of psychological and other variables. Studies that employed multivariate techniques and included a broad range of variables more frequently reported income to be the strongest predictor of leaving (e.g., Aguirre, 1985; Compton et al., 1989; Gelles, 1976; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Lesser, 1990; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Women who had a source of income independent of the abuser, including welfare (Aguirre, 1985; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Lesser, 1990; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), or who had incomes larger than those of their partners (L. Okun, 1986) were much more likely to leave the abuser. In sum, findings for financial indicators appear quite robust.

Unfortunately, fewer studies assessed the effects of other barriers to women's leaving. Women were more likely to leave when they had regular access to child care (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988), transportation (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), and in some cases, social support (Lesser, 1990) but not always (Strube & Barbour, 1984). Potential financial liabilities, such as the number, age, or presence of children, as well as the woman's age, were mostly nonsignificant (e.g., Compton et al., 1989; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Herbert et al., 1991; I. Johnson, 1992; L. Okun, 1986). One study found women's health problems to be a significant predictor of returning to the abuser (Compton et al., 1989). Findings for race as a predictor variable were inconsistent (Compton et al., 1989; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; L. Okun, 1986; Rounsaville, 1978; Strube & Barbour, 1984).

Previous Coping Strategies

A woman's repeated attempts to cope with the abuse are an integral part of the overall experience of violence. Studies that directly or indirectly included women's prior efforts to cope with the violence as a predictor of the stay/ leave decision serve as precursors to studies of leaving as a process. Four (of eight) studies found that the greater the number of previous separations from an abuser, the more apt a woman is to leave (Compton et al., 1989; L. Okun, 1986; Schutte et al., 1988; Snyder & Scheer, 1981). Findings from two (of three) studies indicated that women who had previously employed numerous other coping strategies besides leaving were significantly more likely to separate from the abuser (Rounsaville, 1978; Strube & Barbour, 1984). Short-lived separations and the development of new coping skills may enhance women's feelings of mastery and self-efficacy, making permanent separation

more likely. However, the mixed findings on prior number of separations suggest that other factors may need to be considered as well, such as the resources to which she had access and her desire to seek long- or short-term separation.

Although many of the stay/leave studies view women's multiple returns as problematic and evidence of an inability or reluctance to separate from an abusive mate (e.g., Lesser, 1990; Rounsaville, 1978; Strube & Barbour, 1983), others stress the multiple separations as indicators of persistent, strong efforts by "survivors" to leave for good (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). In light of women's perseverance in the face of violence, L. Okun (1986) suggests the need to view leaving as a process. This positive view of leaving and returning foreshadows the process of leaving studies to be reviewed shortly.

Taken as a whole, the stay/leave studies have furthered our understanding of factors affecting a woman's leaving an abusive partner. They point to an array of environmental and psychological factors that influence a woman's decision to leave or stay—a marked improvement over earlier work that located the source of the problem almost solely within the personalities of battered women. In sum, the current group of studies provides empirical backing to the claims of advocates and theorists in the 1970s who portrayed abused women not as masochists who provoked the abuse but as women facing multiple internal and external obstacles to leaving.

However, there are a number of conceptual problems with this group of studies. First, designating the decision to leave as *the* ultimate outcome variable of interest equates leaving with the cessation of violence. Some research has found that the abuse may cease while she remains with the abuser (e.g., Aldarondo, 1996; Bowker, 1983; J. Campbell, Miller, Cardwell, & Belknap, 1994; Horton & Johnson, 1993) or continue well after the separation (e.g., Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). Moreover, even though these studies consider a wide variety of internal and external obstacles as predictive factors, leaving itself is typically conceptualized as a single act that hinges only on a decision. In reality, not only can the decision change several times, but leaving typically entails a series of other decisions and actions.

Second, because the greater emphasis is clearly on women who have not left or who are still trying to leave, this line of research frequently tends to reinforce an image of the battered woman as relatively passive. It can become difficult for researchers to conceive of her as an active agent who frequently does leave or otherwise manages to free herself from the violence (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). Furthermore, by focusing on stay/leave outcomes, the challenges faced by women in the aftermath of separation are not addressed. Despite these criticisms, findings from the stay/leave studies do provide clues to some of the risk and protective factors faced by battered women after they separate. Implicit in the why-does-she-stay question is the flip side of the coin, "What enables her to leave?"

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH THAT CONCEPTUALIZES LEAVING AS A PROCESS

The 28 publications under review in this section (25 original studies, 1 theoretical article, and 2 review papers listed in Table 2) tend to be more recent than the stay/leave decision studies. Process-of-leaving researchers take issue with the predominant focus on leaving as a single act or decision and they are also more deliberate in their efforts to counter popular stereotypes of battered women as helpless or passive. The main research question differs primarily in its point of emphasis. Because these studies take it for granted that many women can and do leave abusive partners, they place greater emphasis on the flip side of the why-does-she-stay question and so are more likely to underscore women's agency. The question that requires explanation is, namely, "How does she ever manage to leave given all the strikes against her?"

Process studies typically differ qualitatively from stay/leave studies in conceptualizing leaving as a complex process involving many decisions and actions taking place over a period of months or years. According to these studies, leaving begins with changes at the emotional and cognitive levels well before an actual physical departure. When attention is focused only on a single act of leaving, subtle changes in her thinking and behavior are missed and her ap-

TABLE 2 Qualitative Studies Focusing on the Process of Leaving for Battered Women

Study	Sample Size	Source of Sample	Design	Type of Publication	Consideration of Postseparation Issues
Angless, Moconachie, & Van Zyl, 1998	21	Former residents of a battered woman's shelter in South Africa; Women were located from information provided on release forms	Cross-sectional	Article	Approximately one page on this topic
Brown, 1997	na	na (theoretical framework for process of leaving)	na	Article	No mention
Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, & Maman, 2001	78	A subset drawn from a larger women's health study; recruited from five sites affiliated with an urban teaching hospital, including a homeless shelter, HIV care clinic, an infant mortality prevention center, a gynecology clinic, and an outpatient drug treatment center; all were either currently or formerly battered women	Cross-sectional	Article	Approximately one page on this topic
Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998	32	Urban community sample of battered women self-identified as having a serious problem in an intimate relationship; recruited from newspaper ads and bulletin board postings	Interviewed 3 times over 2 ½ years	Article	Postseparation issues and violence mentioned in brief but focus is on degree of women's psychological commitment to relationship
Carlin, 1998	5	Women who had been with an abusive partner for at least 5 years; all had left partner within past 2 years; recruited from a counseling program for battered women	Cross-sectional	Dissertation	Approximately seven pages on this topic
Dobash & Dobash, 1979	109	Current or recent residents of battered women's shelters in Scotland	Cross-sectional	Book	Passing references to postseparation issues but no sections devoted to it
Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998	20	A purposive sample of Israeli women who sought help from an emergency hotline for survivors of domestic abuse	Cross-sectional	Article	No mention
Eldar-Avidan & Haj-Yahia, 2000	15	Divorced Israeli women who had been abused by their former husbands; accessed through social welfare and human service agencies	Cross-sectional	Article	Article devoted to this topic
Ferraro & Johnson, 1983	120	Primarily residents of a battered women's shelter (5 had received services but were not residents)	Cross-sectional	Article	Less than one page on this topic
Goetting, 1999	16	Convenience sample recruited from battered women's shelters and other organizations and agencies sympathetic to battered women	Cross-sectional	Book	Some attention to postseparation issues on a case-by-case basis, but primary emphasis is on women's biographies up to physical exit from relationship
Hoff, 1990	9	Former residents of a battered women's shelter; contacted through state shelter and health networks	1-year naturalistic study (qualitative methodology)	Book	One chapter and brief epilogue on this topic
Holt, 1995	10	Women who had left their abusive partners; social workers in a variety of settings identified and initiated contact with women for possible inclusion in the study	Cross-sectional	Dissertation	No mention
Kirkwood, 1993	30	Women who had been out of an abusive relationship for at least 1 year; recruited through newspaper and radio ads and contacts with an organization for single parents	Cross-sectional	Book	One chapter on this topic

(continued)

TABLE 2   (continued)

Study	Sample Size	Source of Sample	Design	Type of Publication	Consideration of Postseparation Issues
Landenburger, 1989	30	Current or previously battered women recruited through newspaper ads, a community support group, and a battered women's shelter	Cross-sectional	Article	Approximately one page on this topic
Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995	13	Domestic violence survivors recruited by lay and professional helpers in a rural Canadian community	Cross-sectional	Article	No mention
Mills, 1985	10	Residents from a battered women's shelter	Cross-sectional	Article	No mention
Molina, 1999	30	African American working women who sought legal services to obtain a divorce; 18 of these women were domestic violence survivors	Cross-sectional	Article	Article devoted to this topic
Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997	30	Survivors who had terminated a relationship with an abusive partner; recruited through local women's organizations & posters on college campuses	Cross-sectional	Article	Approximately two pages on this topic
NiCarthy, 1987	33	Women who had been out of an abusive relationship for at least a year; recruited from flyers, newspaper ads, and programs servicing battered women	Cross-sectional	Book	Approximately 9-10 pages on this topic
A. Okun, 1998	30	Women who had left an abusive partner for a minimum of 2 years; recruited through newspaper ads, community television ads, and flyers placed at local venues frequented by women	Cross-sectional	Dissertation	No mention
Patzel, 2001	10	Convenience sample recruited from two outreach programs and a resource center for battered women; all had terminated their relationships with the batterer at least 6 months prior to the study	Cross-sectional	Article	No mention
Rosen & Stith, 1997	22	Women had been or were currently in a violent dating relationship; recruited through newspaper ads, flyers reaching the general public, and referrals from clinical colleagues	Cross-sectional	Article	Approximately two pages on this topic
Sleutel, 1998	na	Review of qualitative work within past 15 years	na	Article	Less than one page on this topic
Syers-McNairy, 1990	15	Women who had terminated a relationship with an abusive partner at least 1 year prior to the study; some recruited from women's support groups at a local women's center; others recruited from battered women's programs	Cross-sectional	Dissertation	Much of manuscript devoted to this topic
Ulrich, 1991	51	Formerly battered women recruited through community newsletters, crisis center support groups, and therapists' offices.	Cross-sectional	Article	No mention
Ulrich, 1998	na	Reviews some evidence from various studies that supports notion of a "process of leaving"	na	Article	No mention
Wilson, 1999	9	Women had left their abusive partners at least 1 year prior to study; women recruited by word of mouth and snowball sampling.	Cross-sectional	Dissertation	Approximately 15-20 pages devoted to this topic
Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999	15	Formerly battered women who had terminated the relationship at least 1 year prior to the study; recruited with the help of professional and lay helpers who gave women letters explaining the study.	Cross-sectional	Article	Article devoted to this topic

NOTE: na = not applicable

parent staying behavior is likely to be interpreted in a manner consistent with traditional views of women (e.g., she cannot leave because she is helpless or dependent). To capture the complexity of leaving, process studies attempt to understand women's behavior through their own voices. Women's accounts describe the social context within which the process of leaving takes place, thus bringing to light the courage and determination required in preparing for the final separation. They also highlight the insights that lead to growth experiences along the way, often before an act of leaving can be observed by the outsider.

In this view, survival status is attained through active and cumulative efforts as women gradually learn more effective strategies for dealing with the abuse. Most of the studies that view leaving as a process described women passing through a series of stages or phases leading to an eventual separation(s) from the abuser; however, periods of return to earlier phases are considered normal (J. Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Patzel, 2001). Increasingly popular among process studies is the application of Prochaska and DiClemente's (1984) Transtheoretical Model of Change to battered women's leaving (e.g., J. Brown, 1997; Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, & Maman, 2001; Williams, 2000). The model assesses a person's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness to make a needed change to her life, such as terminating the relationship. Despite differences among individual studies in the amount of emphasis put on a distinct set of stages, several common themes emerged. Because these process studies are feminist in orientation, importance is placed on the role that patriarchy plays, particularly through traditional female socialization and "family values" in women's responses to their abuse (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993). Under a system of patriarchy, women's oppression and devaluation seems almost natural and inevitable. Not surprisingly, most process studies found that many battered women initially drew on traditional religious ideals and female stereotypes to develop strategies to cope with the violence (Mills, 1985; Wilson, 1999). For example, many adopted the role of nurturer (i.e.,

she is the only one who can help him), while minimizing or denying the extent of abuse (Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Mills, 1985). Similarly, others stayed out of a wifely duty to "stand behind their man." However, as Ferraro and Johnson (1983) emphasize, this does not necessarily indicate a woman's passive acceptance or resignation to her fate. Rather, it requires active efforts to construct a particular meaning to her circumstances that will allow both the continuation of the love that she feels toward her partner and endurance of the pain of the abuse. Additionally, many women were isolated from external influences that might challenge either their own or the abuser's definition of the situation. Moreover, African American women are socialized not to seek help from outside the black community to avoid bringing further disgrace and suffering onto the black male by the wider society (Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997). Studies have referred to this phase variously as "endurance" (Landenburger, 1989; Moss et al., 1997), "making do" (J. Campbell et al., 1998), "managing" the violence (Mills, 1985), or disconnecting from self and others (Carlin, 1998).

> **Women's accounts describe the social context within which the process of leaving takes place, thus bringing to light the courage and determination required in preparing for the final separation.**

Additional effort and knowledge is usually required for her to begin questioning her situation, let alone give up the dream of a happy life with a loving partner. Nevertheless, process studies almost invariably found that most of the women reported another shift in their perspective that sometimes occurred suddenly but more often developed gradually as women experienced fleeting insights about themselves and the relationship (e.g., Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998; Holt, 1995; Mills, 1985; A. Okun, 1998; Rosen & Stith, 1997). In this period of reframing (Moss et al., 1997; Patzel, 2001), acknowledgement/contemplation (J. Brown, 1997; Burke et al., 2001), shrinking/loss of the self (Landenburger, 1989; Mills, 1985), or counteracting the abuse (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995), women began to redefine the relationship

as abusive and label themselves as victims. Catalysts that helped to bring about this shift in thinking included an increase in the level of the violence or fewer periods of love and affection; loss of hope that the relationship will get better; witnessing the effect of the abuse on the children; or external influences such as friends, family, and helping professionals who offer support and alternative perspectives (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Eisikovits et al., 1998; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Kirkwood, 1993; Ulrich, 1991). Importantly, Ferraro and Johnson (1983) were among the few to report how some women began reinterpreting the violence when financial and material resources necessary for escape became available. As women recognized the negative impact of the violence on their well-being, suppressed feelings of loss, failure, anger, and/or fear commonly began to surface. However, such feelings provided the fuel many women needed to begin searching for a way out (Carlin, 1998; Eisikovits et al., 1998; Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993; A. Okun, 1998).

Finally, in the disengagement (Landenburger, 1989) or breaking free stage (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995), women's priorities seemed to change from focusing only on the needs of partners to protecting her own needs and reconnecting with the self (Carlin, 1998; Wilson, 1999). Most of the process studies noted how a "woman's agenda to maintain her relationship" was slowly "replaced with an agenda to leave the relationship" (Rosen & Stith, 1997, p. 177). At this stage, women began to engage in activities they believed would help them leave, such as finding a safe place to think, focusing on other areas of life, finding social support, turning to alcohol, making safety plans, enrolling in self-defense classes, setting some limits in the relationship, and making small decisions that helped increase self-efficacy and self-worth (e.g., Goetting, 1999; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; NiCarthy, 1987). Although many women's newfound feelings about themselves were mixed with pain and anguish, they began leaving in many ways that were not always visible to the casual observer, such as arriving home later than usual, withdrawing from their partners emotionally, accepting jobs that took them away from home, separating their belongings

from the abuser's while living under the same roof, and seeking temporary separations at a shelter (e.g., Landenburger, 1989; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995). These temporary separations were not a sign of weakness; rather, they seemed to give many women enough autonomy and self-confidence to make the final break, although sometimes not before a "last straw" episode of abuse occurred (e.g., Angless, Maconachie, & Van Zyl, 1998; Goetting, 1999; Holt, 1995; Rosen & Stith, 1997).

Clearly, process studies highlight the courage, determination, and persistence involved in leaving an abusive partner. By underscoring the agency of battered women, the stereotype of the woman as a passive victim is replaced with a new and more complex psychology of woman-as-survivor, in which battered women slowly regain control over their own lives. From this standpoint, the expectation that women will have the strength and resolve to maintain this independence after the separation seems to follow more easily, unlike most of the work on the stay/leave decision. However, several limitations of this research need to be addressed. The retrospective nature of the data, with one exception (e.g., J. Campbell et al., 1998), and nonrandom sampling procedures should first be noted. The women in these studies were from select samples (e.g., recruited from shelters, battered women's groups, and community advertisements), and most had already made the final break. Furthermore, it is not known to what extent the data might be subject to recall errors as most of the interviews took place quite a few months or years after the separation or shelter stay. Additionally, very little attention is given to ways in which the leaving process may differ by race or ethnicity. One study found that women of color (primarily African American) were much more similar than different from their White counterparts, despite the multiple oppressions faced by minority women (J. Campbell et al., 1998). However, possibly due to racial oppression, African American women in Wilson's (1999) sample appeared to be more conscious of the sociopolitical context that supports men's domination of women.

Most important, however, in trying to counter older notions of female masochism and pas-

sivity, the process studies (e.g., Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993) face conceptual limitations. The parameters for the study of battered women's leaving behavior are similar in at least two ways to earlier research emphasizing intrapsychic processes. First, whereas the notion that battered women can be survivors as well as victims was a necessary and valuable contribution to the field, many of the process studies, with a few exceptions (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; A. Okun, 1998; Syers-McNairy, 1990), come close to the psychological reductionism for which theories of female masochism and learned helplessness have been criticized (see Dobash & Dobash, 1988, for a critique of learned helplessness). Internal explanations for women's decisions need also to be viewed in light of major structural constraints faced by battered women, as many of the stay/leave studies have effectively demonstrated. However, many of the process studies, including the newer ones employing the Transtheoretical Model of Change, seem to suggest that leaving an abusive relationship is primarily contingent on changes in the subjective meaning of the situation to the women (e.g., J. Brown, 1997; Burke et al., 2001; J. Campbell et al., 1998; Landenburger, 1989; Mills, 1985; Ulrich, 1998). For example, Mills (1985) characterizes the process of leaving as one in which battered women shift from being "compliant zombies to reflective actors who decide to leave their husbands" (p. 115). At the same time, Landenburger (1989) emphasizes that battered women need to learn more about abusive relationships. However, in the policy and practice implications section of this study, no mention is made of the need for the provision of external resources, nor the larger social forces that contribute to a woman's continued victimization or harassment should she decide to separate.

Second, the primary goal of most process studies has been to demonstrate the ways in which women still technically "in" the relationship progressively undergo significant growth experiences that are part of the leaving process and are otherwise overlooked by traditional research. Although this has been an important contribution, there seems to be an assumption, with a few exceptions (e.g., J. Campbell et al.,

1998), that the only way a woman can regain her agency is to leave and that staying is always unhealthy. This view is perhaps most apparent among process studies employing the Transtheoretical Model, which is often applied to populations with addictive and problem behaviors such as smoking, drug use, and delinquency (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994). Many well-intentioned practitioners and battered women's activists who adopt this view are likely to be of little help to women who experience less severe abuse and may wish to achieve nonviolence from within the relationship (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000).

Moreover, given the intensity of effort going into showing that these women living with abusive partners are not helpless victims, perhaps it is not surprising that most of the process studies also neglect or give minimal attention to the postseparation period. In most of the studies, the process of leaving seems to abruptly end with the woman's physical departure from the relationship, or else the possibility of ongoing violence or other obstacles following the separation is mentioned in passing (e.g., Angless et al., 1998; J. Brown, 1997; J. Campbell et al., 1998; Eisikovits et al., 1998; Holt, 1995; Landenburger, 1989). As shown in Table 2, only 7 of the 28 qualitative studies devote a somewhat considerable proportion of space to the aftermath of separation (Eldar-Avidan & Haj-Yahia, 2000; Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993; Molina, 1999; NiCarthy, 1987; Syers-McNairy, 1990; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999), and this period is the primary concern of only four of the studies (Eldar-Avidan & Haj-Yahia, 2000; Molina, 1999; Syers-McNairy, 1990; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). However, the challenges to maintaining a life independent from the abuser would seem to constitute an equally important part of the process. Notably, a parallel trend cannot be found in the general divorce literature. When divorce is treated as a multistage process, the process frequently begins with the initial sepa-

There seems to be an assumption, with a few exceptions . . . , that the only way a woman can regain her agency is to leave and that staying is always unhealthy.

ration (e.g., Bursik, 1991; Gray, Koopman, & Hunt, 1991; Pledge, 1992), although there are some exceptions (e.g., Guerin, Fay, Burden, & Kautto, 1987). Thus, the majority of the process studies on battered women either ignore or downplay the importance of the postseparation period, including the violence and other stressors that often occur then.

POSTSEPARATION PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological Outcomes of Abuse

The preceding sections identified some key factors predicting who is most likely to leave an abusive partner as well as the processlike nature of this decision. The emphasis shifted from "What keeps her there?" to "How does she even manage to leave?" For the next set of studies, inquiry centers on the question of "What happens after she leaves?" As the focus now turns to battered women in the postseparation stage of the process, psychological well-being will replace relationship status as the outcome of interest inasmuch as leaving does not necessarily mean a safer, happier life. Relationship status may be related less to well-being but seems to determine the types of environmental circumstances and stressors to which a woman is exposed. Given that battered women who separate will encounter a unique set of circumstances and stressors, it is important to determine how the psychological well-being of these women may differ from that of women who are still living with the batterer and from nonabused divorcing women.

Although many studies include both women who are currently involved with the abuser and women who have since left, very few have made comparisons between these groups when assessing psychological well-being. Among the exceptions, several studies have found that average levels of depression, PTSD, or other trauma symptoms among battered women who have left can equal (Herbert et al., 1991; Rounsaville, 1978) or exceed (Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings, 1995; Lerner & Kennedy,

2000; Walker, 1984) those of women still in the relationship. Recency of separation in one of the cross-sectional studies was related to lower levels of psychological well-being among women who had left (Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). These findings are confirmed by several longitudinal studies that found a significant reduction in the level of trauma symptoms for recently separated battered women over a 6-month (Dutton & Painter, 1993) and 1-year interval (Mertin & Mohr, 2001). At the same time, Anderson (2001) found that positive aspects of well-being, specifically perceived quality of life, increased over multiple time points for women who remained separated from their abusers at least 2 years after shelter exit.

Although the psychological well-being of many separated battered women appears to increase with time, mean rates of well-being provide limited information. Anderson, Saunders, Yoshihama, Bybee, and Sullivan (in press) assessed the course of recovery at multiple time points over a 2-year period for 94 battered women who had left their abusive partners. Findings from the study indicate the need to distinguish among various subgroups of women who have left, as the depression levels for one third of the sample remained moderate to high or actually increased significantly with time. Prevalence rates of depression and anxiety were reported in another study of separated battered women. At the time of shelter residence, 42% of the 59 women in the Mertin and Mohr (2001) study met the full *DSM-IV* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) diagnostic criteria for PTSD, whereas 14% still met the criteria 1 year later. Similar percentages for clinical levels of anxiety were reported at both time points. The prevalence rates at the 1-year follow-up, however, are likely underestimated because 41 women who were unavailable for the follow-up interview were significantly more likely to believe they would be killed by their partner at Time 1. If substantial numbers of women who separate are highly distressed, then more research concerning the relevant risk and protective factors affecting their psychological well-being is needed.

Predictors of Postseparation Well-Being: A Stress Process Model

Drawing from the work of Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan (1981), the remainder of the review employs a stress process conceptual framework from which the findings on predictors of women's postseparation well-being can be organized, interpreted, and integrated. The model may not be superior to others but can provide a valuable, heuristic framework. This approach seems applicable to the study of battered women in the separation process for at least several reasons. First, the stress experience is viewed not as an isolated event but an ongoing process. Similarly, "leaving" for the battered woman is the continuation of a process that begins at the emotional and cognitive level while she is still in the relationship and extends well beyond her physical departure. Second, such models place a heavy emphasis on the combined impact of various environmental factors accompanying a major stressor such as domestic violence and subsequent separation. A severe stressor rarely occurs as an isolated event but is likely to trigger a series of other stressors affecting multiple life domains. Leaving an abusive partner sets in motion numerous, sudden, and often dramatic changes in women's life situations. The multiple stressors facing women potentially involve various emotional and financial losses; new or altered responsibilities as a single parent or sole provider; repeated exposures to violence; and limited access to key social, material, and internal coping resources. Thus, it is theoretically possible for the negative effects of stress to be cumulative.

Finally, process models conceptually allow for diverse outcomes depending on the number, strength, and combinations of environmental factors present. In other words, some women will be more or less traumatized due to differences in the level of overall stress as well as in the amount of social support, self-efficacy, and financial and material resources. Below we review evidence for the impact of three types of factors believed to influence women's postseparation psychological well-being: primary stressors that set the stress process in motion (the violence that caused or contributed to the separation); secondary stressors, or those that accompany the primary stressor chronologically; and coping resources that can serve to cushion the impact of stressors or prevent their future reoccurrence.

Violence

A source of stress that sets battered women apart from other divorcing and separating women is the experience of abuse. Besides having to cope with the traumatic effects of preseparation violence, many battered women are subject to ongoing or escalated violence after leaving. According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, over one half million women are stalked by (typically an ex-) intimate partner annually in the United States (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Data from national crime surveys in the United States and Canada estimate that compared with married women, separated women are about 25 times more likely to be assaulted by ex-mates (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995) and 5 times more likely to be murdered (Wilson & Daly, 1993). Furthermore, 24%-35% of those who were assaulted before separation experience even more severe violence after leaving (H. Johnson, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2001). At least one recent study found that the length of time out of a physically abusive relationship (from 4 days to 4 years) was associated with a greater frequency of stalking victimizations by the former partner in the past month, even after controlling for previous levels of physical and emotional abuse (Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2000).

Unfortunately, domestic violence research is typically focused on the violence taking place prior to separating from the abuser. Only one quantitative study directly examined the relationship between postseparation violence and well-being. Mertin and Mohr (2001) found that

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continued abuse after separation was significantly and positively correlated with anxiety, depression, and PTSD. A number of existing qualitative studies, however, provide more vivid accounts of the stress that postseparation abuse can have on a woman and the direct effects it can have on her well-being. Whereas only 14% of B. Brown and Foye's (1982) divorced homemakers ($n = 134$) described interactions with their estranged husbands as "worrisome," fear of retaliation and continued victimization was a common theme in the stories of most of the battered women who left their abusers (Angless et al., 1998; Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993; Kurz, 1996; Landenburger, 1989; Moss et al., 1997; NiCarthy, 1987; Tutty, 1998; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). These studies make note of other forms of violence often missed by quantitative measures. Harassment and intimidation by batterers ranged from begging, sending flowers, and threatening suicide to pressuring the children for information, making menacing phone calls, trumping up false child abuse charges against her, and threatening to "blow" her head off (Raphael, 1999; Tutty, 1998; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). The presence of restraining orders and mandatory arrest laws seemed to provide little relief for most women (Kirkwood, 1993). Having to live like a fugitive and lack of protection from others were rated among the biggest problems by women from South Africa (Angless et al., 1998). Likewise, about half of the Canadian women in the Tutty (1998) study continued to feel threatened by their partners at least 4 to 6 months after leaving a shelter for battered women. Some women were still having to endure the abuser's continued manipulation and control several years after leaving (Moss et al., 1997). Those who finally found safety expressed how much the violence had been a drain on their emotional resources. One third of Kirkwood's (1993) sample expressed relief as the "dominant feeling" in their lives. "Relief was in response to the lessening of the emotional or physical danger, of the need to be constantly vigilant of their partners' moods and behavior, and of the expenditure of energy in worry, fear, and survival" (p. 107). These

women seemed to be enjoying a higher perceived quality of life and less depression. Similar sentiments were echoed in Eldar-Avidan and Haj-Yahia's (2000) sample of divorced Israeli women.

Secondary Stressors

Secondary stressors, brought on by the separation itself, simultaneously involve multiple losses on one hand and new or altered responsibilities on the other. In this respect, divorce is sometimes conceptualized as a dual transition (B. Brown & Foye, 1982) and is typically considered one of the most stressful life experiences (see Pledge, 1992, for a review). Separated women experience significantly more negative life changes (psychological, physical, and social) on average within the 1st year than do married women (Nelson, 1989). Researchers have begun to delineate some of the stressful life disruptions that are specific to the divorce process, three of which are discussed below.

Attachment and loss. At the emotional level, one key issue facing many women who separate is the presence of lingering feelings of attachment and loss around the former intimate partner. One small body of research begins with the assumption that feelings of attachment and loss in battered women are more situational and not qualitatively different from those of other women leaving troubled nonviolent relationships (e.g., J. Campbell, 1989; Eldar-Avidan & Haj-Yahia, 2000; Molina, 1999; Turner & Shapiro, 1986; Varvaro, 1991). This research—for example, J. Campbell (1989)—borrows heavily from the bereavement literature in suggesting that attachment issues in battered women might be more appropriately viewed as a normal and expected grieving response to having lost a major attachment figure. When women are in the process of leaving, they tend to miss the positive qualities of their partners and the relationship (Landenburger, 1989). However, Dutton and Painter's (1993) longitudinal data indicated that the attachment of recently separated women in their sample

decreased by 27% over a brief period of 6 months, which suggests the situational nature of the attachment.

Additionally, attachment in divorcing women must be understood in terms of women's socialization, specifically in terms of idealized, culturally prescribed gender roles as well as their access to power and resources relative to men. In qualitative interviews, battered women who had left commonly reported an ongoing attachment that was sometimes less related to feelings about the partner himself than to the loss of a relationship with the highly valued wife-mother role (Carlin, 1998; Hoff, 1990; Mills, 1985; Moss et al., 1997; NiCarthy, 1987). They felt great sadness in having to let go of these childhood dreams. In some battered and nonbattered women, the identity disruption was so keenly felt, they reported feeling a complete loss of their core selves (Kirkwood, 1993; Mills, 1985; Moss et al., 1997) requiring them to undergo a process of "identity transition" to "reconstruct a new sense of self" (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996, p. 983). In the Degarmo and Kitson (1996) longitudinal study of divorcing and widowed women, the greater the centrality of the "coupled identity" to a woman, the greater was the psychological distress both shortly after the partner's death/filing for divorce and 1 year after. J. Campbell and associates (1989; J. Campbell, Kub, Belknap, & Templin, 1997) found only weak or qualified support for the relationship between the valuing or defining of oneself in terms of the traditional wife/mother role and greater depression among battered women. However, it is important to note that battered and nonbattered control women were recruited on the basis of their currently having serious difficulties within an intimate relationship, so feelings of loss may not yet have been as great to these women. In sum, these findings reflect the powerful role of socialization in shaping women's reactions to such deeply felt loss.

Other losses. Finally, many women undergo a sudden major loss of economic resources as a result of the separation. According to data from national samples, divorcing women experienced declines in financial well-being averaging about 30% to 36% when there were young children in the household (e.g., Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). For more than one quarter of single mothers, the declines in income relative to needs were greater than 50%. Many battered women arrive at shelters with no money or possessions except for the clothes they are wearing (Tutty, 1998). Domestic violence has been linked to homelessness and other economic problems in samples of poor women (e.g., Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). Nevertheless, only two quantitative studies under review have directly examined the impact of the actual loss on women's postseparation psychological well-being. Sato and Heiby (1992) link the loss of household income and other primarily material losses (e.g., home, job, security) directly to greater depression in battered women after controlling for the effects of physical abuse, prior depression, and other variables. Similarly, Berman (1988) found a strong trend in his multivariate analysis toward higher rates of depression in divorced women who experienced the greatest losses in income.

Changes in family responsibilities. Adding to the complexity of divorce, other stressors appear in the form of new and often conflicting responsibilities, especially those associated with the single parent/economic provider role. At the same time, many women have to find employment or increase their income to compensate at least in part for the loss of their partner's financial contributions. Family demands may increase largely due to numerous changes in family composition, roles, and relationships as well as children's difficulties in understanding and adjusting to these changes (e.g., Buehler, Hogan, Robinson, & Levy, 1985-1986; Dixon & Rettig, 1994; Gerstel, Riessman, & Rosenfield, 1985). Clearly, these challenges also loom large in the minds of battered women who separate. Children must be settled in the new home, schools, day care, and the neighborhood. A substantial number of battered women mention their children's difficulties in sorting out what happened (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). In the Humphreys (1995) study, every woman spontaneously mentioned concerns around her children, especially in trying to adjust her work

schedule so that children would need a baby-sitter as little as possible. This frequently proves extremely challenging given the continual close supervision required for preschool children and the time involved in transporting school-aged children to and from school and other activities (B. Brown & Foye, 1982). Issues concerning jobs and children were among the most important and frequently mentioned 4 to 6 months after having left the shelter, for Tutty's (1998) sample. Parenting responsibilities and getting or keeping a job were also among the top three worries of divorcing homemakers in another study (B. Brown & Foye, 1982). Competing goals and time demands seem to be more the rule than the exception for divorcing women and this has definite implications for their psychological well-being.

Studies that focused on the number of recent changes across multiple life domains, and women's feelings about the changes, seem to show fairly consistent results with respect to psychological well-being. For example, Voydanoff and Kelly's (1984) study of 468 married and divorced parents indicated that parents in households experiencing three or more major changes in family life during the year preceding the interview (e.g., divorce, increased expenses) had higher levels of perceived time shortages. This was especially characteristic of households with single custodial mothers. Moreover, feelings about single parenthood and parenting skills were significantly correlated with mothers' general sense of psychological well-being (Thiriot & Buckner, 1992). Buehler et al. (1985-1986) found that the more divorce-related stressors experienced by single mothers in various areas, including those relating to parent-child relationships, the former spouse, or financial, housing, and legal issues, the worse was the women's level of parenting satisfaction. In short, there may be a cumulative effect of multiple stressors that negatively affects divorcing women's well-being in the form of time pressures, job tensions, and low levels of satisfaction with family life simultaneously.

Cumulative effects of stressors. One study longitudinally tested the long-term effects of multiple stressors, including violence and secondary stressors (i.e., attachment/loss, changes in family responsibilities, financial losses), on depression in a sample of 94 women who had remained separated from their abusers for at least 2 years (Anderson et al., in press). The sample was divided into thirds by overall level of exposure to stress. Depression for those with the highest stress levels near the time of shelter exit remained moderately high or actually increased for some over the 2-year period. The gap in psychological well-being between the highest and lowest stress groups widened with time. These findings are consistent with a stress process conceptual framework in at least several ways: (a) Mental health outcomes varied among women exposed to a similar traumatic stressor (i.e., severe violence), which suggests that women who leave their abusive partners are not a single population; and (b) downward spirals in well-being over time is one form the stress process can take. It may be that initially high levels of stress can trigger a series of subsequent negative events or more chronic strains that place an individual at an ever greater risk for negative mental health consequences if coping resources are not present in sufficient quantities (e.g., Pearlin, 1999; Wheaton, 1999).

Coping Resources

Although a link between the violence and/or subsequent separation from the abusive partner and psychological distress seems clear, not all women will develop clinical depression, PTSD, or other trauma symptoms. Reactions to stressors will vary even after differences in the severity of the violence and secondary stressors have been considered. A major explanatory factor for such differences lies in women's access to various coping resources that provide them with the means to exert some control over their lives in general and to respond to particular life stressors when they arise. Coping resources include (but are not limited to) various external and internal necessities such as material goods and services, income, social support, and self-efficacy. Coping resources are believed to be especially relevant for battered women and other women who separate from their intimate partners.

Material resources. Material necessities are crucial for a woman to establish a life independent from her former partner. For example, affordable housing and transportation are especially important for a battered woman as these resources literally make her less available to be beaten (Ellis, 1992). Food, clothing, child care, and a personal source of income are essentials in maintaining her independence. However, of 11 possible areas of unmet needs, the battered women in Sullivan and associates' (Sullivan, Basta, Tan, & Davidson, 1992; Sullivan & Davidson, 1991) shelter sample most often reported needing help with obtaining material goods and services such as furniture and clothing (83%-84%). Not surprisingly, compared with battered women who returned to the abuser, women who were ending their relationships were even more likely to need help with accessing resources such as finances, education, legal assistance, and transportation.

The need for housing and economic resources was documented in several studies as the most pressing concern among battered women who had recently left (Kirkwood, 1993) and divorcing women from the general population (Amato & Partridge, 1987; Berman, 1988; B. Brown & Foye, 1982; Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998). Even among the employed African American women in Molina's (1999) sample (40% of whom had been battered), divorce presented substantial financial difficulties for a majority (57%) due to low salaries and lack of child support. Many battered women in Hoff's (1990) and Kirkwood's (1993) qualitative studies remarked that their energy during their shelter stay, or shortly after, was almost totally absorbed in practical concerns such as securing permanent housing or a fixed address for themselves and their children, a necessary prerequisite for receiving government financial aid (Ellis, 1992). They frequently reported getting little cooperation from housing authorities and other institutions. When they did locate housing, it was often too expensive, too small for a woman with children, or located in a high-crime area where they felt unsafe. These issues were cited as a major source of stress by many women. Only a single empirical study specifically tested for the effects of housing stressors

for divorcing women and men (e.g., residential moves) and found partial support for its negative impact on single parents' adjustment (Buehler et al., 1985-1986). Other studies of battered women (e.g., J. Campbell et al., 1997; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983) and other divorcing women (e.g., Duffy, 1989; Lindsay & Scherman, 1987; Miller et al., 1998; Shapiro, 1996; Thabes, 1997; Thiriot & Buckner, 1992; Wilcox, 1986) are fairly consistent in finding that various measures of income and to a lesser extent, education, predict better postseparation psychological well-being.

Social Support. Of all the coping resources, social support—most broadly defined as "the available social relationships that objectively may be called upon for help in times of need" (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993, p. 687)—has been the most widely researched in the domestic violence and general stress fields. Most quantitative studies of battered women assessing the impact of social support on various measures of psychological well-being have found a significant, positive relationship (e.g., Anderson et al., in press; Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; R. Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Kemp et al., 1995; Mertin & Mohr, 2001; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). However, only two of the studies under review specifically tested for the efficacy of social support for women who have since left the shelter or otherwise remained separated from the abuser (Mertin & Mohr, 2001; Anderson et al., in press). In the Anderson et al. (in press) study, separated battered women with superior support systems at the time of shelter exit had significantly lower levels of depression than those with less support more than 2 years later even when controlling for other coping resources, stressors, and baseline levels of depression. These findings fit with those of studies with qualitative data on the importance of postsepa-

> **The need for housing and economic resources was documented in several studies as the most pressing concern among battered women who had recently left . . . and divorcing women from the general population.**

ration social support. Friends, family, support groups, and new romantic partners provided support in the form of advice and information, practical assistance, companionship, and emotional support (e.g., Hoff, 1990; Molina, 1999; Syers-McNairy, 1990; Tutty, 1998; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

Internal resources. Also very important for the battered woman are internal resources such as having confidence in her ability to exert some measure of control over her immediate environment, variously referred to as self-care agency (e.g., J. Campbell, 1989), locus of control (e.g., R. Campbell et al., 1995; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993; Orava, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996), mastery (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Nurius, Furrey, & Berliner, 1992), and self-efficacy (e.g., Benight, Swift, Sanger, Smith, & Zeppelin, 1999; Sullivan, Campbell, Angelique, Eby, & Davidson, 1994; Sullivan, Tan, Basta, Rumptz, & Davidson, 1992). Numerous studies, including some well-controlled prospective analyses, have found one or more of these closely related internal resources to be directly and significantly related to subsequent positive adjustment in battered women (e.g., J. Campbell et al., 1997; R. Campbell et al., 1995; Dutton & Painter, 1993), with greater feelings of self-worth related to higher levels of well-being in terms of perceived quality of life, less depression, and other psychological improvements. Although separating battered women typically exit the relationship with an eroded sense of self, their final resolve to leave and maintain their independence also provides them with a sense of accomplishment (e.g., Carlin, 1998; Wilson, 1999). A number of other investigators (J. Campbell, 1989; J. Campbell et al., 1997; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999) have begun to call attention to these existing inner resources so that service providers can help women enhance their capacity for resilience and growth at a time when they are quite vulnerable.

Institutional resources. From the literature reviewed thus far, it seems apparent that many separating battered women are in need of a variety of resources and that their personal resources as well as those of their informal social

support networks can be overwhelmed by the multitude of stressors. The threat of ongoing or escalated violence is frequently accompanied by housing problems and a lack of transportation, job opportunities, and affordable child care (Correia, 2001). For many women who are able to call on the support of close friends and family members, both emotional and financial help is usually temporary, particularly when the threat of violence continues after separation (e.g., Angless et al., 1998).

Institutional support, on the other hand, can be more substantial and provide women with resources that may be more lasting than personal resources. Quantitative studies assessing the impact of institutional resources on separated battered women's well-being are rare and most of them include women in their samples who are still with their abusers. Nevertheless, Sullivan and associates (e.g., Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Sullivan et al., 1994) assessed the efficacy of a postshelter advocacy intervention program using an experimental design. At shelter exit, 278 battered women (some who were returning to the assailant) indicated what issues they would like to work on with trained paraprofessionals should they be randomly selected to receive a 10-week advocacy intervention, 4 to 6 hours per week. Controlling for baseline perceptions of life quality and other variables, the investigators found that battered women who received the support of advocates reported significantly greater satisfaction in attaining needed resources, fewer incidences of abuse by their assailants, and higher levels of quality of life at subsequent follow-up interviews, compared with women who were not randomly selected to participate in the intervention.

Another follow-up program for battered women who had exited shelters employed trained professionals who assumed more of a general, supportive counseling or case manager role on many issues, including self-esteem and effective ways of accessing needed services and resources (Tutty, 1998). Results of this study are also very encouraging, with a greater proportion of follow-up clients' seeking further education or job training than those in the non-follow-up group. Quantitative measures showed significant improvements in self-esteem and in

emotional support for participants 4 to 6 months into the program. The qualitative component of the study indicated that women were particularly pleased with the emotional support they received but also felt they benefited from the help with accessing community resources to satisfy legal, financial, or other needs. However, it is difficult to isolate the specific components of the programs that contributed the most to these positive outcomes as many of the women were simultaneously involved in battered women's support groups as part of the follow-up program.

In at least two evaluative studies of professionally led support groups for battered women, there were pretest to posttest improvements in self-esteem, belonging support, locus of control, and perceived stress (Tutty, Bidgood, & Rothery, 1993). Participants were also being subjected to less violence at the time of the posttest. Moreover, group participants showed greater decreases in depression, anxiety, and other negative outcome variables compared with controls who were not part of the intervention. No differences between participants and nonparticipants emerged in another study, possibly because of the small sample size (Cox & Stoltenberg, 1991).

Despite the small sample sizes and exploratory nature of many existing evaluative studies, both the qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest the promise of postseparation and postshelter services for battered women. Although these kinds of piecemeal services cannot adequately address the many significant needs of this population, findings from these studies provide evidence that women benefit from such resources.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings on women's stay/leave decisions consistently revealed two broad categories of predictors of leaving: material resources (especially employment and income) and social psychological factors such as negative feelings toward the partner. Income variables were stronger predictors than psychological ones in multivariate studies. A history of childhood abuse and the nature of adult abuse were not consistent predictors of leaving or staying. These findings imply that counselors need to maintain a dual consideration of material resources as well as the psychological/emotional lives of survivors. Policies that bolster women's income are especially needed, along with job supports such as child care and transportation. Research in this area needs to focus more on women who are more representative of the population and not part of help-seeking samples.

Survivors typically go through several phases or shifts in their thinking during the process of leaving. They may leave and return multiple times, each time learning new coping skills. As with divorcing women, these phases may involve cognitive and emotional "leaving" before the physical leaving. The phases include (a) endurance of and managing the violence while disconnecting from self and others; (b) acknowledging the abuse, reframing it, and counteracting it; (c) breaking free, disengaging, and focusing on one's own needs. There appears to be a fourth, postseparation phase that is not addressed by the majority of these studies. The findings of studies on the process of leaving can help advocates and counselors understand that the leave/return cycle is an opportunity to learn better coping skills and is not a sign of failure. Counselors can use the process model to educate women and validate their experiences. This type of research would benefit from larger, more representative samples. The research also needs standardized measures and longitudinal designs.

Fewer research efforts have focused on the psychological well-being of survivors who have left their abusers. In the months after separation, well-being seems to improve for a majority of women over time despite the difficulties they face. Many survivors experience more traumatic effects and depression right after separation than survivors still in a relationship. However, a substantial minority who are exposed to the highest levels of stressors and are most lacking in needed resources are at risk for continued negative or worsening psychological outcomes. The stressors they face have been largely underestimated or overlooked. Preliminary evidence

suggests that the presence of various coping resources such as social support, material necessities, and self-efficacy can protect against negative psychological outcomes. Women often have insufficient personal resources and require additional services and support.

Research on the psychological well-being of separated survivors highlights again the need for policies that increase resources for employment, employment training, child care, and transportation. Domestic violence programs and other social service agencies need to do more to reach out to separated battered women and assess their needs. More studies are needed with specific measures of social support, and more research is needed on identifying factors early in the separation process that signal negative outcomes. The increased focus in research and practice on victims who are struggling to leave or who have left highlights the multiple challenges they face in leaving an abusive partner. The research also points to some promising steps that can be taken to help these victims alleviate the traumatic effects of battering.

NOTE

1. Table 1 represents a fairly comprehensive inclusion of such studies. We focused on the most rigorous ones with a sample size of at least 30. We also included reviews of these articles. The first phase of the search process involved locating articles via the PsycINFO database, using the keywords *battered women, domestic violence, family violence, leaving, and staying*. We then located numerous studies from the reference lists of the above studies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

Practice and Policy

Predictors of staying/leaving
- Advocates and counselors need to keep dual focus on material and emotional factors related to leaving.
- Policies need to provide a means out of poverty.

Leaving as a process
- Counselors can use the stages to educate survivors.
- All practitioners need to view leave/return cycles as opportunities for new coping skills.

Psychological well-being
- There needs to be more focus on outreach to women who have left violent relationships.
- There need to be policies to support more resources such as job training, child care, and transitional housing.

Research

Predictors of staying/leaving
- There is a need for studies with a greater range of violence severity and that include victims not seeking help.

Leaving as a process
- Larger, more representative samples are needed.
- Longitudinal studies with standardized measures can further test the information gathered from qualitative studies.

Psychological well-being
- There is a need for more longitudinal studies that include subgroups of women under different levels of stress.
- There is a need for studies with specific measures of social support.

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SUGGESTED FUTURE READINGS

Rhodes, N., & McKenzie, E. (1998). Why do battered women stay? Three decades of research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *3*(4), 391-406.

Sleutel, M. (1998). Women's experiences of abuse: A review of qualitative research. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, *19*, 525-539.

Anderson, D., Saunders, D., Yoshihama, M., Bybee, D., & Sullivan, C. (in press). Long-term trends in psychological well-being among women separated from abusive partners. *Violence Against Women*.

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