

Female Students' Attitudes on Re-entering Abusive Relationships

Sally Welbourn and Jim Zemek

Undergraduate Students, Human Development and Family Studies

Key Words: Female college students, abuse, re-entering, optimistic bias.

Abstract

Women re-entering abusive relationships is an increasingly important issue. This study investigated female college students' attitudes on why women re-enter abusive relationships in hopes to gain a further understanding of possible reasons. It was hypothesized that the given variables: Lack of education, financial independence, abuse history, unrealistic optimism, remorse factor, and emotional attachment, would play a factor in whether or not one would return. Findings supported the hypothesis that the variables utilized were felt to be factors in women re-enter, except for optimistic bias. Implications for practitioners and for future researchers are that awareness needs to be focused more on this optimistic bias, encouraging women more directly by teaching them self awareness.

Introduction

According to Hilbert and Hilbert (1984) and Strube (1998), an estimated half of women who have been involved in an abusive relationship will at some point return to the batterer (as cited in Martin, Berenson, Griffing, Sage, Madry, Bingham, & Primm, 2000). Because of the physical and emotional risks involved in such relationships, it is important to study various factors to gain further insight into the reasons why women return to these abusive relationships. For the purpose of this study, abuse refers to misusing power and or injuring oneself or another (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2000). A piece to the puzzle does not fit. To escape only to re-enter leaves reasons to believe hidden variables reside within the given relationship and or within the abused victim. What are these variables and if identified, could the number of those who re-enter abusive relationships decrease? Understanding reasons for returning could have a significant impact on breaking the cycle abused women often fall into. Variables that will be investigated include Optimistic Bias, underestimating the reality of risk (Martin et al., 2000); the Remorse Factor, returning out of guilt (Griffing, Ragin, Sage, Madry, Bingham, & Primm, 2002); and Emotional Attachment, which implies an affectionate regard for another person through personal ties (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2000). The literature regarding women who encountered relational situations where the choice of leaving and or staying had been provoked through abuse was examine. To gain a better understanding of possible reasons as to why women chose to stay or to leave, we surveyed the attitudes of female college students at a small Midwestern university.

Literature Review

In researching reasons as to why women enter and or re-enter abusive relationships, it is important to evaluate past studies. In examining this topic, there appears to be a gap from 1987 to 2000. There are many studies on women who stay, but not many studies have been done

regarding women who leave and return. Society often depicts women who re-enter an abusive relationship as those who have a low self-esteem or low self-confidence. This is not always the case. Many hidden variables lie within the reasons women chose to or not to reunite with their batterer (Schutte, Malouff & Doyle, 1987; Martin et al., 2000; Griffing et al., 2002; Griffing et al., 2005).

A study conducted by Schutte et al. (1987) researched 117 women in an abusive shelter in Colorado. This study investigated the history of women and whether or not their history had an impact on the choice of leaving or staying. Did pre-victimization affect women's choices? Surprisingly, the results showed women who were physically or sexually abused as children were less likely to return to an abusive relationship. A history of victimization did carry some leverage in depicting whether or not a woman returned to her abuser, however, this process was seen to have taken place over a long period of time creating what appears to be a cycle of leaving, entering into a shelter, and returning to the batterer. Education reflected a large advantage for women seeking an outlet from the abuse. The study showed that women who were educated were less likely to re-enter into the relationship. This supports findings that women in careers have fewer financial ties to the batterer, resulting in a less stressful situation.

Martin et al. (2000) conducted a study to try to understand risk assessment and decision-certainty within 70 female domestic violence victims. The researchers discovered that abused women who reflected high levels of certainty also showed greater levels of what was called optimistic bias. Simplistically, women who were sure they would not go back were at a higher risk of returning. Women were seen as underestimating the reality of their risk, indicating there was a need for increased self awareness. This underestimating of obstacles played a factor in the decision process of leaving. However, there was some relation between prior separations and ultimately remaining outside of the relationship. Possibly, this cycle of leaving only to return allows a woman to slowly over time regain self sufficiency helping to sever the ties permanently.

Griffing et al. (2002) examined external and internal stress factors that could impact a woman's choice of leaving and or re-entering abusive relationships. The study took place at an urban retreat consisting of 90 African American and Latina young female residents. Reasons for returning in the past and the thought of doing so again were examined. They found that emotional attachment and the remorse factor for the batterer caused an increased probability of returning. Women may feel as if the abuser has been punished enough with her leaving and return out of guilt. Again this reflected the risk factor that many women were not aware of their own optimistic biases. Financial needs were also a top for reason for why women returned, which was often combined with emotional guilt creating a situation tying both internal and external aspects together in the decision-making process.

Griffing et al. (2005) also studied the impact of women's past history. study dealt with the increased risk that women who have previously been victimized have in entering or returning to abusive relationships. Again, African American and Latina women were studied. Sixty-six percent had separated from and returned at least one time. The study suggests that women who have been a victim in earlier years may have a more difficult time separating from an abusive relationship due to vulnerability aspects and self-esteem. These women are at a greater risk of returning than those who have not been abused as a child. However, this cycle could possibly be a necessary step in eventually separating completely from the batterer.

Among the literature reviewed, there were three major factors questioned: Does past experience play a part in the cycle of abuse? Are women caught in self biasness and therefore not aware of the eluding possibility that they are at risk for returning? And, how much impact does

guilt play into women putting the batterer above their own self-worth? From the studies presented, many insightful discoveries were made in understanding possible reasons this cycle of entering, leaving and re-entering take place. However, in order to subdue this violence, one must anticipate those at risk before the cycle begins. College students were researched to try to help fill a gap in research in discovering whether or not knowledge and awareness removes the risk of women re-entering into abusive relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this study is the Social Learning Theory (Strong, Devault, & Cohen, 2005). It was developed by Julian Rotter and Albert Bandura, among other psychologists who highlighted the role of cognition in learning. This theory emphasizes the importance modeling has on children and how behavior learned through this process can affect one's interactions. These interactions are in relationship to culture, society, family, and the natural inner qualities of a given entity. This theory suggests that influence from parents holds much weight in establishing self expectations.

As applied to our study, this theory predicts that a given individual's past experiences (learned behavior through modeling) in culture, society, family, and the natural characteristics an individual holds, will determine the choice(s) in entering and or re-entering into abusive relationships.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the research question: "What are the attitudes of female college students regarding reasons as to why women re-enter into abusive relationships." It is hypothesized that the given variables will determine the reasons why women re-enter into abusive relationships: Education, financial situation, past abuse history, optimistic bias (unrealistic optimism), remorse factor, and emotional attachment (Strong et al., 2005).

Methods

Participants

The site of this study was at a Midwestern university. Participants were 51 female students and one person who declined a gender label. There were five participants within the freshman category, 13 sophomores, 12 juniors, 19 seniors, and three graduate students. Of these 52 students, 32 ranged in age from 18-21, 15 were 22-25, and 5 were over 25.

Research Design

The survey design type used is best described as a cross-sectional study design in that we captured attitudes from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The form of data collection was self-administered questionnaires. This method was most fitting in that it was the most efficient way to gather the data directly on campus since the data collection needed to be fast paced, convenient, low cost, and have a quick return due to the time constraints of the class. The population was the university student population; our sample was female students randomly selected through the quota sampling design hence acquiring many different backgrounds, from majors to age. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; our study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to address the attitudes of students regarding reasons as to why women re-enter into abusive relationships, a survey was designed. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent which included a description of the study for the participants to keep. It also included definitions of any terms not commonly known, along with risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and finally, contact information of the research team, the supervisor as well as the instructions needed for completing the survey. The survey consisted of three demographic questions relating to gender, academic status and age. Participants were then given seven closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were developed using the literature and theory regarding what factors relate to attitudes regarding abused women.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature-inspired, it was determined that they clearly connected to the larger problem of abused women re-entering into abusive relationships. Instrument statements' cover broad range of issues regarding possible reasons abused women re-enter abusive relationships. To increase validity, the survey was piloted on one undergraduate female student. Feedback indicated that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

To collect the data for this study, the researchers approached students on campus between October 30, 2006 and November 1, 2006. Following the random sample design, researchers went into the Student Center and asked one out of every three women as they passed by if they would be willing to fill out the survey. Participants were read the implied consent and notified that it was theirs to review further if desired. To maintain the most confidentiality possible, participants were asked to take the survey at a table other than the researcher's and encouraged to complete it at their own pace. They were then told to place the finished survey into a closed box which was placed out of sight. We over sampled by five respondents to ensure the target sample number was met in case of missing data. As surveys were collected they were kept in a locked box at one of the researcher's homes until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was first "cleaned" and checked for any missing data, assuring that the surveys were filled out in their entirety. The "cleaned" surveys were then "coded" using acronyms for each variable. Demographic variables: gender, academic status, and age were the first three questions on the survey. Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To determine if lack of education was a variable we used the acronym (EDU), to determine if lack of financial independence was a variable we use (FIN), to Abuse history was a variable we used (HIS), if unrealistic optimism (optimistic bias) we used (UOP), if remorse played a factor we used (REM), if having children involved was a variable we used (CHD), and finally if emotional attachment was a variable we used (EMA). The data-analyzing computer program called *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used to analyze the data. Given our research topic we used descriptive statistics consisting of frequencies and conducted a reliability analysis, Cronbach's Alpha.

Results

The results indicated that there was no missing data. The Cronbach's Alpha measure of reliability in our analysis was 0.211.

Table 1

Frequencies

Variable						Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
(EDU)	11.0%	23.0%	21.0%	35.0%	10.0%	100.0%
(FIN)	2.0%	12.0%	13.0%	52.0%	21.0%	100.0%
(HIS)	2.0%	10.0%	23.0%	38.0%	27.0%	100.0%
(UOP)	15.0%	27.0%	37.0%	19.0%	2.0%	100.0%
(REM)	0.0%	2.0%	10.0%	50.0%	38.0%	100.0%
(CHD)	0.0%	14.0%	15.0%	46.0%	25.0%	100.0%
(EMA)	0.0%	19.0%	12.0%	42.0%	27.0%	100.0%

Note. (EDU)=Women who lack education is a factor in women re-entering an abusive relationship; (FIN)=Women who lack financial independence is a factor in re-entering an abusive relationship; (HIS)=Women with an abusive past are a factor in re-entering into an abusive relationship; (UOP)= Women who overlook their risk of abuse have a greater possibility of re-entering into an abusive relationship; (REM)= Women who feel guilty for leaving are a higher risk in re-entering an abusive relationship; (CHD)= Children impact women to re-enter an abusive relationship for reasons of not wanting to take them away from their father; (EMA)= Romantic feelings impact women to re-enter abusive relationships.

Discussion

Findings supported our hypothesis. To begin, education was seen as somewhat of an advantage for women wanting to transition out of an abusive situation. Women with more education have a greater extent of career choices leaving them with fewer ties to the batterer (Schutte et al., 1987). Forty-five percent of participants agreed that lack of education would increase the chances of one re-entering making this the highest percentage indicated in the data.

According to Griffing et al. (2002), a primary reason why women tend to return to an abuser is because of financial issues. If a woman's finances are stable, she is less likely to be at a high risk for re-entering into an abusive environment (Martin et al., 2000). Based on the research this tends to be viewed as a high indicator in women who re-enterer, with 73% agreeing. Lack of resources and support in this given area creates a burden often vastly difficult for an individual to carry and hence making the option of staying seem more simplistic and less stressful.

The abuse history variable stated that previous victimization carries leverage in determining whether or not a woman will reunite with the abuser (Schutte et al., 1987). According to Griffing

et al. (2005), women who had been a victim earlier in life were at a higher risk of returning to an abusive relationship due to vulnerability aspects and lack of self-esteem. Looking at the results, 65% of participants were in agreement.

An interesting variable was that of the remorse factor. This variable intertwines itself with that of past history and emotional attachment. From the results presented by Griffing et al. (2002), women who previously returned to a batterer reflected a higher level of emotional attachment and were more likely to continue the cycle of re-entering over a woman who was separating herself from a situation for the first time. This remorse factor would place a more direct level of guilt among the women after hearing promises from the batterer that he will seek counseling and obtain help hence heightening the risk of returning by placing the women into a mental state of 'believing' change will occur. The data collected showed that this variable had the highest level of agreement, with 88%.

This leads to the only variable in which the majority of participants disagreed with, which was the proposed idea of optimistic bias. Optimistic bias, according to Griffing et al. (2002) is when an individual does not perceive his/her risk accurately. According to this article, a relationship between an abuse history and emotional attachment was clearly portrayed in women who returned. Women who had previously left and returned were more inclined to admit that emotional attachment would affect their decision into re-entering. However, those who left for the first time were less willing to state they would return. In our study, female college students overall disagreed with optimistic bias, with 42% of the sample in disagreement with the statement. The majority responded that this issue would have little to no effect on individuals. However, because this 'idea' is new, many people may not be aware of this way of thinking.

Limitations

The sample size may limit the generalizability of results. Also, because of the location to which participants were selected, a lack of diversity is noted.

Implications for Practitioners

Findings indicated that much awareness dwells in the mindset of mid-western, female college students. The need to inform females of the tendency to underestimate or not identify self-risk is important in that it could be an opportunity of decreasing victimization. This could be done by first educating both females and males at the high school level through means of health classes promoting self risk awareness. It could be done by educating teachers and those in leadership positions working with youth. Also, at the college level, an initiative could be made to hall directors and resident advisors working with freshman students incorporating once again the idea of self risk helping individuals acquire the skills to assess their risk accurately.

Implications for Future Research

The next step of research recommended would be to enhance the sample size by reaching out to more than one university; incorporating a more diverse sample would allow for more generalization of female college students' attitudes in the Midwest. If this study were to be duplicated we would recommend possibly re-wording or providing an explanation of the optimistic bias variable (*UOP*) which is women who overlook their risk of abuse have a greater possibility of re-entering into an abusive relationship. We feel this variable is of importance in this field of study and should not be overlooked. According to our reliability analysis the Cronbach's Alpha would increase from 0.211 to 0.468 if the variable (*UOP*) was eliminated.

However, we think possible reasons for this would be a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the concept of optimistic bias.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, we have found that a majority of female college students hold adequate knowledge of possible reasons why women re-enter abusive relationships. However, it appeared that a lack of understanding one's risk could hinder a woman's perception in deciding whether or not to remain in the company of abuse. As a result, it is hoped that more emphasis be put on educating women on gaining self awareness not only for the purpose of physically, and emotionally removing themselves from the situation, but in the possibility of helping women gain the tools and resources needed in stopping the cycle (re-entering) of abuse. What one learns can in fact be unlearned (Strong et al., 2005). This cycle can be reversed. For example, a learned behavior may lead to a practiced habit, but this habitual act can possibly be undone through the process of gaining self awareness. Believing in oneself is where this power of change resides. True learning is to realize the possibilities in unlearning.

References

- Hilbert, J. C., & Hilbert, H. C. (1984). Battered women leaving shelter: Which way did they go? *Journal of Applied Social Science* 8(2), 291-297.
- Griffing, S., Ragin, D. F. Morrison, S. M., Sage, R. E., Madry, L., & Primm, B. J. (2005). Reasons for returning to abusive relationships: Effects of prior victimization. *Journal of Family Violence* 20(5), 341-348.
- Griffing, S., Ragin, D. F., Sage, R. E., Madry, L., Bingham, L. E., & Primm, B. J. (2002). Domestic violence survivors' self-identified reasons for returning to abusive relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16(3) 306-319.
- Martin, A. J., Berenson, K. R., Griffing, S., Sage, R. E., Madry, L., Bingham, L. E., & Primm, B. J. (2000). The process of leaving an abusive relationship: The role of risk assessments and decision-certainty. *Journal of Family Violence* 15(2), 109-122.
- Merriam Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.). (2000). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
- Schutte, N. A., Malouff, J. M., & Doyle, J. S. (1987). The relationship between characteristics of the victim, persuasive techniques of the batterer, and returning to a battering relationship. *Journal of Social Psychology* 128(5), 605-610.
- Strong, B., Devault, C. & Cohen, T. F. (2005). *The marriage and family experience: Intimate relationships in a changing society*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Strube, M. J. (1998). The decision to leave an abusive relationship: Empirical evidence and theoretical issues. *Psychological Bulletin* 104(2), 236-250.