TOUGH CHOICES:
WOMEN, ABUSIVE PARTNERS,
AND THE ECOLOGY OF DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

In a qualitative study, 35 women who had lived with violent partners were interviewed regarding their experience making decisions about their relationships to their abusers. This paper explores their stories, integrating the common themes with reports from other studies. The insights of the women participating in this and other research support an ecological understanding of the tough choices they face—a framework which respects the role of environmental factors (demands and resources) in helping or constraining choices at the same time as it recognizes the importance of powerful mediating factors (beliefs, values, and a sense of personal efficacy).

When women who have been abused by a partner describe their victimization, a mixed response is common. Other people may feel deeply sympathetic and, at the same time, impatient: "It is easy to assume with a situation as horrific as being beaten, year after year, that the solution is obvious and simple: Leave" (Brown, 1997, p. 7).

Most women do not simply leave, but endure years of mistreatment before making effective changes. Even after seeking refuge in a shelter, as many as 50% of women return directly to their abusive partner (Cannon & Sparks, 1989; Snyder & Scheer, 1981; Aguirre, 1985), and even more do so within a few weeks after their stay in the shelter is over. Giles-Sims (1983) and others estimate that women leave abusive partners four to five times on average before permanently separating.

Pressure to make quick, clear decisions to leave an abusive relationship is frequently present because the safety and well-being of women and their children

are at stake. While respect for women's rights to make their own decisions and patience with the time that change requires are vital (Okun, 1988), the urgency often associated with the choice cannot be denied. In this context, an understanding of the pressures operating for and against women making viable choices helps in determining what supports will be most useful.

Recent research indicates that problems in the relationship between battered women and professional helpers are common, and derive from a tendency to adopt overly limited frameworks in understanding the women's situations: "Attempts to understand battered women and related intervention methods usually follow one of two modes—one focuses on the psychological consequences of abuse . . . and the other on the social and political context. . . . [Helpers] need to recognize possible clinical outcomes of being abused . . . [and] to be socially and politically aware. . . . The clinical and social considerations are inseparable and interactive" (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1996, pp. 436-437).

Ecological theory, borrowed from the life sciences and applied to social phenomena, is a prominent recent effort to provide an analysis which attends simultaneously to "clinical and social" considerations, and it is the utility of this perspective in understanding abused women's decision-making that is our focus. In this article, we present the results of qualitative research regarding women's experiences with the decision to remove themselves from violent relationships integrated with the findings reported in other studies. Our goal is not to discover new theory, but to use our participants' data (and data from participants in other studies) to test the "goodness of fit" of ecological thinking with the experiences they describe.

Concerns about the ecological model include the charge that, as a perspective that emphasizes adaptation, it can serve negative socially conservative purposes when adaptations to unjust or oppressive social arrangements are encouraged (Carniol, 1995). Another issue has to do with the ecological model's abstract, metaphorical nature, and its perceived inability to inform our "domain-specific" practice with specific social problems (Wakefield, 1996a, 1996b).

Our goal is to explore how our participants' data and other studies' findings do or do not support an ecological analysis: do abused women's stories yield data that can be usefully organized in an ecological framework, and what validity do they lend to criticisms of ecological theory?

METHOD

This study was part of a broad evaluation of services to women subjected to domestic violence in Calgary. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, with the particular questions addressed in this paper being approached through the qualitative analysis of interview transcripts. The study benefits from the flexibility and depth that naturalistic methods offer, and is strengthened by a larger sample than is usual in research of this type.

Qualitative methods are particularly useful in a study of this sort, which aims to explore the conceptual meanings of women's experiences rather than to examine relations among discrete, predetermined variables. Findings from other studies are

presented with our own in an integrated rather than separate fashion. The rationale for this is that our purpose is integrative: we wish to consider how our participants' experience, in concert with that reported in other studies, is congruent (or not) with a popular emerging perspective. Thus our agenda is unlike that which drives most quantitative research, and some, but not all, other qualitative work, and this is our rationale for deviating somewhat from academic conventions regarding how this report should be organized.

All of the 35 women contributing the data presented in this report were using shelter services at the time of the study, and all had been abused in heterosexual relationships. Therefore, the term "abusive partner" refers to a male whenever it appears in what follows.

The interviewer was female, with professional experience working in family violence settings. Interviews were partially structured, directing attention to general topics associated with decision-making and other aspects of participants' experience. Within these topics, the participants could explore issues with considerable flexibility.

Approach to the Analysis

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Typed copies were analyzed by coding meaning units into general themes, then into more specific categories within those themes.

As indicated, we consulted the literature as our analysis progressed, systematically integrating our findings with those of other researchers. The goal was not theory development in the same sense as a more conventional grounded-theory study would approach the task. With the goal of testing the goodness of fit of an ecological perspective, we used that theory to suggest general themes. The analysis entailed judgements as to how well our respondents' experience could be related to those theoretically derived themes. Further, we were interested in how what they told us would help elaborate on the ecological framework, making it more concretely relevant to women who have been abused and are grappling with decisions as to what to do about that.

FINDINGS

Participants

Although the bulk of findings to be discussed emerge from our qualitative analysis, we begin with descriptive statistical information, so that some important characteristics of our sample are understood.

The average age of the women we talked to was 32 years ($SD = 6.14$). Most had been in live-in relationships prior to coming to the shelter, while eight were separated or divorced and four were single. The average number of years of education completed was over twelve, suggesting some post-secondary training for many. Most had very a low monthly income ($\bar{x} = \$290.44$, $SD = \$570.07$) since they did not work outside the home and had lost the benefits of their partner's salary. About one-third (31%) of the women were dependent on social assistance.

Twenty-eight had children, the average age of the oldest being 8.8 years (*SD* =4.45).

Eleven women identified with a particular ethnic group (five were Aboriginal and six had immigrated from diverse other countries).

As with participants in most studies of women seeking shelter services, the abuse sustained by those we interviewed had existed throughout their relationship with the perpetrator. While the length of the average relationship was 7.2 years, the average time that abuse had occurred was reported as 6.4 years. On standardized measures (Hudson, 1992), the women rated both their physical and psychological abuse well above the clinical cut-off score of 15, providing a mean rating for physical abuse of 20.7, and, for psychological abuse, 59.3.

Although these statistics shed some light on our participants' circumstances, the interview transcripts provide a more vivid appreciation of the experiences that had driven them to seek refuge. One woman was stalked and she and her young child were kidnapped and held captive in a basement for a month, fed only sporadically. Many women reported having received threats to kill them and their children. Participants reported having been beaten when pregnant, having limbs deliberately broken, or, after surgery, being kicked at the site of the incision. Marital rape and inspection of sexual parts because of extreme jealousy by the partner were reported. In all, over half of the shelter residents described sexual abuse while, for 25%, it was a weekly or daily occurrence.

Although not all participants experienced such severe mistreatment, the need for refuge and the seriousness of their common experience is clear.

The Decision to Leave: Framework for Analysis

As noted, our analysis of participant interviews is intended to expand our understanding of the utility of ecological thinking for understanding women's decision-making. There are various approaches to conceptualizing the ecological perspective available; we elected to use one in which the key concept of goodness of fit is described in terms of demands (problems, needs, and stresses) balanced by available resources (Rothery, 1999). In addition to the balance of demands and resources, there are powerful mediating factors unique to each individual, which explain why similar levels of demand and availability of resources can lead to different outcomes for different people. There is wide agreement that cognitions are critical as mediating factors for abused women, especially beliefs that affect their readiness to make decisions and their sense of personal power or efficacy.

The elements highlighted in this ecological perspective—demands, resources, and mediating factors—are not mutually exclusive; it is useful to separate them for analysis, but they overlap considerably at the level of experience.

Demand Factors

The effects of demands depend on their severity balanced against other factors. Sometimes demand factors motivate action, while under other conditions they are disorganizing or debilitating.

Recent research (Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Tutty & Rothery, 1997) stresses the immobilizing and traumatizing effect of being violently treated. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common reaction to violence. It can include an emotional and psychological "numbing" as well as a desire to avoid confronting the experience of having been assaulted and its implications (Walker, 1991; Herman, 1992). Comparisons of abused women with control groups show that violence contributes to depression, low self-esteem, and a lowered sense of personal power—impacts that would also impede effective decision-making.

Many of the women in our study described violence that constitutes terrorism, in that the intent of the violence was to instill fear and a sense of helplessness as well as to inflict pain:

> You're much more than a prisoner in your own home . . . you're a hostage. It's different being a prisoner, at least a prisoner does have some rights. A hostage has none. You know that if you don't leave, you're going to die, that maybe the next time he really will kill you, or lose control and crack your head open.[1]

> His behaviour over the last six months was getting much more erratic. I was starting to fear physical violence from him. He started pushing me and things like that. He'd been having an affair with a woman for about a year and a half, and I had found out that he had picked her up and threw her down a flight of stairs. I was really starting to be afraid.

> I guess he was following me. He had me right by the hair, from behind. I was shaking like crazy. He was yelling at me, and saying "next time I see you, I'll kill you." I didn't even look back, I just kept running.

> On four different occasions he blackened my eyes, split my lip open, wrenched my shoulder out, bruised my spine up and down—I can't believe I'm saying this—strangled me with a telephone cord, dislocated my knee, raped me, tore my clothes off on several occasions so that I couldn't go anywhere. Yet he made the police believe that I caused it, and it was my fault.

For most people, such treatment would necessarily have profound effects impacting decision-making, representing demands that will often be immobilizing:

> I just felt like I was at the end. I felt in myself that I was dying. I didn't care about school, I didn't care about working. Nothing mattered. And so it didn't matter if I lived or died.

Another point to be emphasized is the evidence in the above examples supporting feminist concerns about the need for analyses that address power imbalances (not an inherent aspect of ecological thinking). The ability of a perpetrator to inflict enormous physical pain while convincing the police that the woman victim was responsible speaks to the continuing strength of patriarchal assumptions in the cultural context within which women must seek protection.

In addition to describing how abuse at a certain level of severity can have debilitating effects, rendering decision-making difficult, our respondents indicated that threats to children have a special power. Such stresses can be particularly demoralizing, undermining the woman's ability to cope. Similarly, the power of custody disputes is recognized in the literature (Liss & Stahly, 1993), and for our participants these were also a stress with respect to which women have a great

sense of disempowerment, partly because decision-making power rests with legal authorities:

> It will break me if he gets custody of the children. That scares me more than I can tell you.

Perpetrators are well aware of the manipulative advantages of threatening to harm children, or to take custody of them one way or another:

> He's trying to get me to give him my daughter. I say, "no way." He told me that on one of his visits that he would take my daughter and leave the province and Canada if he had to, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. The next day he phoned back and said, "You think our daughter's going to live with you for the rest of your life? No way, I'll have you terminated."

> My husband left us two and a half years ago. And he came back a week, no it's more than a week—see, I've lost track of time. Two weeks ago. And he wants to kill me and the kids, so we're in hiding.

While extreme violence and threats involving children can be immobilizing, under other circumstances, they are often the "trigger" event that motivates a decision to act (Giles-Sims, 1983; Wilson, Baglioni, & Downing, 1989; Davis & Srinivasan, 1995). Our participants told us that the critical incidents that persuaded them to take action typically involved one or both of two issues. First, the women's tolerance for pain, fear, and coercive treatment finally had been exhausted, a "line" had been crossed:

> I'm crying and hurting that he hit me, and my head's really hurting. And every time he hurt me, hurt more in the sensitive part of your head. He'd bang your head in the wall. Oh my God! This kind of situation, I said, "I can't stand it anymore."

> I grabbed my daughter out of her high chair, went to the bathroom and locked the door. He came charging at the door, and started yelling at me, saying this was all my fault, I was responsible for all of this misery. He left and then got to the office, and the phone rang. . . . He just screamed so loud I couldn't hear him, so I just hung up and then he started calling and calling, so I had to unplug the phones. And I said to myself, "I don't want to live like this anymore." And that was the point where I'd made a decision.

A second aspect of incidents functioning as triggers which motivate decisions to change is the perception of threats or damage to children in the family:

> It kept on increasing, kept on increasing. Problems, fights kept on intensifying, and that was just all I could take. And then with the final blow-up . . . abusive language, yelling and screaming right in front of all this crowd of people. So embarrassing. I couldn't control him. I couldn't talk to him, couldn't even calm him down, and when he slammed the stroller into my daughter, that was the final straw. He tried grabbing my baby out of my arms first, and then he raised his fist and was threatening to hit me, and then when he finally slammed the stroller into my daughter, that was the final straw. It was all I could take. I wasn't willing to deal with it anymore.

> There was the little guy. If I wouldn't put him down, he'd beat the two of us and stuff like that. It was time to go. I'd had it.

Protecting children from physical abuse is one common reason to leave an abusive partner, while another is concern about the emotional and developmental consequences of living in such an unhealthy environment:

I swore that if I ever felt that frightened again, that would be it. That could be touching or whatever, that I would be gone. Because I know that it has really screwed up my son. He's 16 now, and I don't want that to happen to my daughter.

It was like nothing would deter him anymore. He started to do things when the kids were around. Yelling at me and swearing at them.

He said he'd take it easy. Well, it got into those little liquor bottles, then to a 12-pack of beer, and it just kept getting more and more. I said, "That's it, I can't live with you anymore, and put the children through this kind of behavior." . . . . I don't want his son exposed. He's into various substances, and I don't want them growing up thinking "Oh, Dad does it, it must be right."

We'd reached a point in our relationship where my son would come home from school, have supper, he and I, and he would leave and come home at bedtime . . . because I found myself telling him, "Don't talk, because if you make any kind of conversation, your step-dad will find something in that conversation that he doesn't like, so please, like, avoid the argument." We can't live like that anymore. We can't. It's just totally unhealthy. Totally.

A final note is that abuse which continues after separation in the form of threats to safety (of the woman and her children) are often cited as stresses which contribute to a decision to *return* to a partner (Johnson, Crowley, & Sigler, 1992). Given inadequate legal protections, a woman may conclude that the safest response to escalating threats is to renew a dangerous relationship. Such threats are often strongest when women are leaving the security of a shelter and must become established in the community where protective resources are not as available (Tutty, 1996).

Resource Factors

The literature regarding resources identifies different types of support (Cameron & Vanderwoerd, 1997; Rothery, 1999; Rothery & Cameron, 1985). Our analysis of what our participants had to say and our reading of other research suggests that concrete/instrumental and informational/emotional supports are both important to women and their decision-making.

When discussing these types of support in the abstract, differentiating categories is easy enough.[2] However, we recognize the extent to which they overlap experientially. The provision of a concrete support (such as help obtaining housing) can, for example, be directly beneficial at an emotional level as well. While it proved useful to organize our analysis using two resource categories, we would not wish to lose sight of the extent to which they are interrelated in their effects.

With respect to *concrete/instrumental* resources, it is clear that finances and housing are critical factors affecting the ability to become independent. McDonald, Chisholm, Peressini, and Smillie (1986) found that 78% of residents in a second-stage shelter believed that, apart from the transition house, their only choice was to return to their abuser, as most of them had come to the shelter bereft of possessions and money. As early as 1976, Gelles reported that the strongest predictor for leaving an abusive husband was financial independence. When Wilson et al. (1989) studied factors related to readmission to a shelter after having

left, these included a lack of income. Tutty (1993) found that other concrete resource issues facing women include employment and child-care.

Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found women were more likely to live independently if they were economically self-sufficient. The type of abuse women experienced was not a significant predictor of the choice they made, indicating the importance of financial resources relative to demands in enabling women to break off abusive relationships (see also Greaves, Heapy, & Wylie, 1988).

If women are unable to afford housing, they may return to an abusive relationship out of economic desperation (DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991). Another extreme outcome can be homelessness; it is not uncommon for homeless women to be former shelter residents who failed to find adequate accommodation (Breton & Bunston, 1992; Charles, 1994).

The resource needs raised most frequently by our participants were housing, finances, safety, legal services, social support, and vocational and educational needs. Almost half of the women we interviewed were seriously concerned about money. Many participants expressed feelings of insecurity over having decided to leave a husband who had maintained control of their financial lives for years:

> I went to see the place, the apartment, and I came back and felt scared . . . because I was so dependent on my husband's income. He was always paying the rent, took care of everything, and I thought about it yesterday. That's why I felt really scared.

Often, these concerns are coupled with anxiety about the effect of reduced circumstances on children:

> But the kids don't understand. They're "Oh, can I have this . . . ?," and "Can't we have some ice cream today, Mom?," and "Can't we stop over there for lunch?," and "Why can't we have it?" And I don't want to keep saying, "Because we don't have any money because we're poor now." I mean, that's not their problem in the sense that it's not their responsibility to shoulder the fact that now we can't afford those things. So I'm trying to figure out . . . how I can gently say . . . "We just can't do that?"

Insufficient resources in the form of legal services commonly are mentioned as a reason why women return to abusive partners (Johnson, Crowley, & Sigler, 1992). Tutty's (1996) evaluations of two follow-up programs reported that dealing with the legal system caused considerable anxiety for previous shelter residents attempting to establish new lives. Our participants also discussed their need for legal assistance to protect property and parental rights, and to assure safety for themselves and their children. They recognized restraining orders as helpful, despite their limitations, and also the protections offered by secure shelters and other services.

With respect to *informational/emotional* resources, the research literature indicates that emotional supports (Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996; Tutty, 1993) and informational supports are significant when they provide validation of a cognitive position comprising three beliefs: (1) the abuse is real, (2) the abuse is not acceptable, and (3) something can be done about it (i.e., it is necessary to take charge of the problem somehow) (Davis & Srinivasan, 1995).

As in other studies, resources such as counselling, education about abuse, and books were mentioned frequently by our participants as supports affecting how they perceived and evaluated their experience. Often, professionals help by offering insight into relationship dynamics, especially difficult boundary issues with the perpetrator:

> The last time I talked to the Outreach worker she said, "I know you don't mean to, but you are giving him mixed messages because you give him an inch, and he takes a mile. He thinks that because you're agreeing to these little concessions, it will maybe lead to more, which is what he wants . . . you have to be more careful to give a clear, simple message."

Professional helpers also frequently are credited with helping women to face the reality of their situations and to evaluate its seriousness and long-term effects:

> One thing that one of the counsellors said to me that day, and it stuck with me—if I waited until my daughter was five, my oldest would be 14, and the pattern would be set—and I just couldn't sit by and watch that happen.

Another common contribution of professionals is in the area of values clarification and empowerment:

> I'd been doing a lot of work in group therapy, in counselling, in books, in seminars, and I think finally what it was, was I got to a point where I realized I didn't want to live like this anymore, and I wanted to start looking at choices.

Mediating Factors

As important as demands and resources are, a woman's perception and interpretation of those realities are also powerful in shaping how she responds to them. Among the general hypotheses as to why the "obvious" solution of leaving abusive partners eludes many assaulted women for so long, there is considerable interest in the role of beliefs affecting readiness to change. Our analysis of our participants' stories (and other researchers' findings) suggests that readiness is a function of empowerment and clarifying values.

It should be noted that, like many decisions to change, leaving a partner is more a process than an event. Change is seldom tidy and linear; more often, it is characterized by uncertain progress and frequent reacquaintance with old problems before a clear sense of direction is acquired and new options firmly established.

Thus, when women appear to vacillate regarding their relationship to abusive partners, they are engaged in a normal change process, observable in other people with other problems: "If we move away from the dramatic issue of woman battering to the more mundane behavior change areas of dietary change, weight loss, exercise, and quitting smoking, it may be easier to acknowledge how difficult it is to make seemingly simple, obvious, and healthy changes that will add years to our lives and enhance the quality of all those years" (Brown, 1997, p. 8).

The simplest description of change which implies a "readiness" factor is the common reference to a continuum with denial or immobilization at one extreme and resolve at the other (Davis & Srinivasan, 1995; Pilowsky, 1993). Research resulting in a more detailed description of this continuum (Prochaska, 1995) recently has been explored for its possible applications to women's decision-making (Brown, 1997).

Our participants' stories support the importance of readiness to change as a mediating factor. For example, resources may be present in the woman's life, but will not be used by her until the time is right:

> I knew the shelter was here, but didn't consider it, until I read the book, *Getting Them Sober* by Toby Rice. He made it very clear in the book that under certain circumstances it becomes necessary to take a step like this, and he made it seem like it wasn't something taboo—it was something to be encouraged. It took me a long time actually. I read that book two years ago, but that's when I first started to think about it . . . maybe that's an open window . . . but it wasn't until I thought: "that's it, I have no choice." Then I used it [the shelter].

A precondition to readiness is often a certain level of reality testing (this was touched on earlier with reference to the impact of emotional/informational supports). Such empowering cognitive developments very commonly include labelling abuse for what it is, recognizing the seriousness of what one is being subjected to, and accepting that the partner/perpetrator is unlikely to change.

What cognitions *impede* decision-making by abused women? Socially induced beliefs with disempowering effects are often cited, especially socialization of women to sacrifice their own needs for their partners and children. Related to this are social norms which hold women primarily responsible for keeping the family happy and together—a failed marriage is equated with personal failure for the woman (Pilowski, 1993).

Low self-esteem and a tendency for women to blame themselves for the violence they have experienced often is cited as a problem (Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996; Ellis, 1992) and as a reason women return to abusive partners (Schutte, Bouleige, & Malouf, 1986). A further observation about the self-esteem issue is that women are socialized to accept a value system in which their own needs are given a lower priority than the needs of their partners and children.

Social prescriptions that promote self-sacrifice make it difficult for abused women to claim rights for themselves and to act on their own needs (Glass, 1995). According to some writers, this difficulty is reinforced by a socially prescribed capacity for empathy that makes women aware of the vulnerability and neediness behind their partner's violence. A protective response based on this perception keeps emotional commitments strong despite severe mistreatment. Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, and Walker (1990) emphasize this hypothesis in explaining "the mysterious 'stickiness' of these relationships" (p. 356).

Interviews with abused immigrant women (Pilowsky, 1993) reveal themes which connect the question of empowerment to the clarification and assertion of values. Women may be immobilized if they "do not perceive themselves as either empowered or morally fit to leave an abusive relationship" (p. 14). Freedom to decide comes with a cognitive shift entailing strong elements of moral reasoning or values clarification: "At various stages in the continuum of abuse, each woman gained the courage to alter her life by deciding to leave. . . . The process was 'felt' or intuited as a transformation in thinking about the morality of her situation" (p. 19).

Competing values that facilitate or impede a decision to leave are a negative valuing of being treated violently versus a positive valuing of loyalty and self-sacrifice in the service of the family. Socialization to be a "good" wife and mother pressures women to stay with their family, even when it is not safe for them to do so.

As noted earlier, sensitivity to the abusive partner's unexpressed vulnerability and a felt obligation to nurture him because of it are advanced as common reasons for remaining in abusive relationships (Goldner et al., 1990). Along with self-sacrifice on the altar of a partner's needs, Giles-Sims (1983) reported that women often thought they should stay with their partner "for the sake of the children." Smillie (1991) also found that women who returned to their husbands after having lived independently cited their beliefs about the needs of their children as a main reason.

For participants in our study, moral reasoning or values clarification was a critical cognitive shift which freed them to make decisions. The theme suggested earlier in this paper in recurrent phrases such as "I realized I didn't want to live like this anymore" support the central importance of clarifying values in becoming empowered to act, as does an additional example:

> I'm thinking when I'm in my home—what is my life? It is a dog's life. A dog's life is better. And sometimes I'm thinking I'm not human. So that's why I took those sleeping pills. I felt I didn't have a choice—I didn't have anywhere to go. That's why I took those pills. I thought—maybe I'll die and my problems will be finished. But when I come here and I see other ladies here, I think I am human, and I have rights in my life.

Often simply clarifying one's rights for safety and respect stimulates movement toward change, while at other times a more difficult weighing of contending values is required:

> Until finally it was to the breaking point that it was like, either you walk out on this kid [her stepson, who she was protecting] or you get killed. You're not going to be able to save him if you're dead. You'd better go and try to take care of him.

Finally, the necessity of embracing one's own strengths, competence, and resources is highlighted by those of our participants who had made their tough choices and reached a point of resolution. They tell us such a cognitive accomplishment is invaluable if the change process is to be consolidated:

> I don't feel he could touch me at all. If he did try and affect me in some way, I have lots of legal rights on my side, and I'm very aware of what those are. Anything he could try and do, I wouldn't let it affect me. I would let him know clearly, this is not acceptable. This activity has to stop, whatever the activity might be.

> I still have to deal with the baby's father now for visiting rights, so I still have to see him, but it seems easier now to deal with him because he has no control over me anymore. Anything he says, I just pass it off. I say to him in no uncertain terms, "You're here to pick up our son and that's it . . . nothing else . . . I don't need to hear anything else from you."

CONCLUSIONS

Using an ecosystems perspective to organize our participants' data establishes that there is a beneficial goodness of fit between the theory and the women's experiences. The information the women provided lends itself to organization within such a framework, and a systematic use of the framework directs attention to a range of issues. As a tool for analysis to help us understand the pressures and opportunities that face women as they wrestle with critical decisions, the ecological perspective is relatively non-reductionistic and should encourage attention to variables that our respondents (and those in other studies) consider important. The need to integrate psychological and sociopolitical modes of analysis noted at the beginning of this paper (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1996) can be satisfied, at least partially, if such a framework is carefully utilized.

Despite this breadth, it remains incomplete in the understanding it provides of our participants' decision-making context. A valid critique of ecological thinking, especially in relation to the issue of violence against women, is that its emphasis on goodness of fit can easily translate into an equation of health with adaptation. Lacking a built-in critical social analysis, the perspective can miss situations where adaptation to oppressive social arrangements may alleviate immediate problems while allowing causal social inequities to continue unchallenged. We would be remiss if we concluded this paper without affirming that while our ecological analysis enjoys more breadth than a more reductionistic focus on psychological variables to the exclusion of social realities (or vice versa), it does not deny the need for critical social analyses that are broader still. The context within which our participants' ecological adaptations occur includes sexism and economic deprivation, for example.

This said, the model has, we believe, been shown to be a useful one, offering a meaningful framework for organizing what our participants told us about the tough choices they face. It helps us to understand the pressures that work for and against viable decision making, and to think non-reductionistically about the kinds of supports and interventions that can (and do) make a difference.

NOTES

1. The quotations from participants that are provided throughout the rest of this paper are single examples illustrating common themes, shared by a large number of the women who spoke to us.
2. More refined categorizations are common in the social support literature, but we found two general categories were enough in working with the interview data obtained from participants in this study.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans une étude qualitative, on a fait des entrevues avec 35 femmes qui avaient habité avec des partenaires violents. Chaque entrevue portait sur l'expérience de la femme par rapport aux décisions qui affectaient ses liens avec celui qui l'a abusé. Cette étude examine les histoires de ces femmes, en intégrant les thèmes communs de ces histoires avec des informations tenues

d'autres études. Les aperçus des femmes qui ont participé dans cet étude et dans autres études favorisent une caractérisation écologique des choix difficiles auxquels elles font face. Un tel cadre, tout en respectant le rôle des facteurs environnementaux (demandes et ressources) en favorisant ou on limitant ces choix, reconnaît aussi l'importance de quelques puissants facteurs médiateurs (croyances, valeurs et un sentiment d'efficacité personnelle).

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