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Predicting the Timing of Women's Departure From Abusive Relationships

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The aim of this study was to investigate forces that affect the timing of women's exit from violent relationships with men. Abused women were recruited from posters in the community and battered women's shelters, interviewed, and followed up for 10 years. Data for this study are based on 100 women and were analyzed using event history analysis. Age, ethnicity, and alcohol consumption levels of both partners predicted the timing of women's termination of abusive relationships. An interaction effect showed that women who scored above the mean on an index of physical aggression and who never used shelter services had the longest trajectories of violence exposure; severely abused women without shelter use were more likely to stay. Our findings indicate that women who receive shelter services endure shorter periods of violence than women who do not access such services. Further outreach, especially to women experiencing high rates of physical aggression, is recommended.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence; wife abuse; spouse abuse; violence against women; shelters; battered women's shelters; domestic violence; advocacy; intervention*

Intimate partner violence is an important social issue and a significant health problem in the United States. Recent survey data suggest that nearly 2 million women experience physical assault annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), and women experience a higher frequency and longer lasting violence at the hands of their intimate partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). A common refrain raised about abused women is "Why don't they leave?" Such a question implies that women who endure abuse or choose to stay with their abusers should shoulder the blame for the abuser's violence.

Researchers have raised several questions about earlier research on victim blaming and questioned the pathological approach adopted toward abused women (Gelles, 1997; Pagelow, 1997).

During the past three decades, researchers have tried to unravel the various factors that might influence a woman's complex decision to leave or remain with an abusive man, underscoring the fact that for abused women, the process of securing safety for themselves and their families is one wrought with financial, cultural, legal, and emotional obstacles (Barnett, 2000; Sleutel, 1998).

Relationship termination is contingent on several interdependent factors ranging from fear of the unknown future (Pilkington, 2000), women's individual skills and threats of further harm from the abuser (Landenburger, 1998), availability and access to financial resources (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995), religious and cultural barriers (Hoff, 1990; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001), and personal growth and introspection (Acevedo, 2000) to recognition of victimization and resulting anger (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Kirkwood, 1993) and available social support (Davis & Srinivasan, 1995). Empirical investigations have uncovered the following determinants: the frequency or intensity of violence (Horton & Johnson, 1993; Kingston-Reichers, 2001), availability of social support (Dunham & Senn, 2000; Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings 1995), abusers' alcohol use patterns (Johnson, 1992; Horton & Johnson, 1993), length of stay in shelters (Hilbert & Kolia, 1997), and advocacy services (Sullivan, Campbell, Angelique, Eby, & Davidson, 1994). In addition, certain demographic variables influence women's departure, including age (Follingstad, Hause, Rutledge, & Polek, 1992), ethnicity (Strube & Barbour, 1984; Testa & Lenoard, 2001), economic status (Gelles, 1976; Gondolf, 1988; Strube & Barbour, 1984; Horton & Johnson, 1993), length of relationship (Strube & Barbour, 1984), and presence of children (Testa & Leonard, 2001). Younger women, minority-group women, women under the poverty level,

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and women with the longest relationships are least likely to exit early from abuse.

Only a few studies have focused on abused women's decision making in prospective studies. In one of the earliest studies, Strube and Barbour (1983, 1984) found that ethnicity, length of relationship, economic difficulties, and subjective measures of love were associated with stay/leave decisions. In their study of 100 battered women from shelters, Rusbult and Martz (1995) found that at the end of one year, a third of the respondents had not returned to their abusers. Divorced respondents cited violence as one of the main reasons for termination of their marriage (Kalmuss & Seltzer, 1986). Outside of a handful of studies such as those reported in DeMaris (2000, 2001) or Sanchez and Gager (2000), who used the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) data, we were unable to locate other studies that applied event history analysis to examine abused women's decision making. Previous studies found that male violence and lower relationship quality, cohabitation status, and traditional attitudes of wives significantly predicted marital dissolution. Finally, in a random controlled trial of advocacy services for abused women identified through shelters, those women receiving advocacy services for several months were 10% less likely to report violence exposure than were women without such services (Sullivan et al., 1994). The present study is an attempt to build on earlier literature and empirically identify those contextual forces that affect the timing of women's decisions to leave violent relationships.

Method

The study was based on a secondary data analysis of a 10-year longitudinal data set of women and their children, examining the intergenerational transmission of aggression (for more information, see McCloskey & Bailey, 2000). The original study recruited 362 women who were first recruited in 1990 (Wave 1) and followed up two times during a period of 10 years. Of these, 192 were domestic violence cases, and 170 were controls. Abused and nonabused women were recruited through posters and public announcements throughout a midsized city in the southwestern United States. In addition, community shelters for battered women were contacted, and referrals were accepted from more than six different shelters in Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona. Data were collected through in-person interviews. Support counseling services were offered to participants during the years surrounding active data collection.

Sampling Approach

The subsample of women for the current analysis was drawn from those women who reported being in an abusive heterosexual relationship during the year preceding the Wave 1 interview in 1990 ($N = 192$). Selection rules were then applied: (a) Only women who had departed from their abusive partners after the start of the study (after Wave 1 interviews) were included, to retain truly prospective data—thus, 39 women were excluded because they separated from their partners before the commencement of the study; (b) 3 women were excluded because of inconsistent responses; (c) 7 women were excluded because of missing data on the dependent variables (the exact date of leaving); and (d) 43 women were lost to follow-up after the initial phase. In summary, 92 women were omitted from the original sample of 192 eligible abused women, resulting in a sample size of 100.

Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample. The average age of the abused women was 31.5 ($SD = 4.3$), with 40% younger than 30. Nearly half of the sample was Anglo-American (48%). Of the women of color ($N = 52$), 73% were Mexican American. Because the study was originally designed to include children, all women had at least one child ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.4$). The women's mean educational level completed was 12 years ($SD = 2.5$). The average monthly family income (\$1,322, $SD = 812.80$) was below the 1990 national threshold of poverty for a family of four (see Table 1). Comparisons of the 92 excluded women with the current study sample revealed no significant differences with respect to age, ethnicity, educational levels, number of children, and employment status.

Measures

Timing of Data Collection

Data for our analysis were derived from in-person interviews with women during 1990 and 1991 about violence, sociodemographics, alcohol use, social support, and relationship characteristics. Women were tracked and follow-up interviews performed during 1996–1997 and 1999, from which our status variable is derived: whether they left or stayed with their abusive partner from 1990.

Control variables. Control variables were selected based on the evidence from earlier research, including age, ethnicity, respondents' educational levels, number of children, length of relationship, and employment status.

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency (<i>N</i> = 100)
Age	
< 29.99 years	40
30–33.99 years	36
≥ 34 years	24
Ethnicity	
Anglo	48
Hispanic	38
Other	14
Number of Children	
1–3	68
≥ 4	32
Educational Level	
≥ High school	60
Some college	39
Family income	\$ 1,322 (<i>SD</i> = 812.80)
Employment Status	
Unemployed	62
Employed (part/full-time)	36
Length of Relationship	
≤ 7.99 years	54
8–11 years	21
≥ 12 years	24

Frequency of abuse. Fifteen items from Straus' (1979) Conflict Tactics Scale were used to measure women's domestic violence victimization in 1990, dating before the dissemination of the revised CTS (cf. Straus & Gelles 1990). The verbal and nonverbal aggression subscale was a continuous sum score and included six items: insulted or swore at you; sulked or refused to talk about an issue; stomped out of the room, house, or yard; did or said something to spite you; threatened to hit or throw something at you; and threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something. The physical aggression subscale was further divided into moderate and severe physical aggression subscales. The three-item moderate physical aggression subscale included threw something at you; pushed, grabbed, or shoved you; and slapped you. The sum of the items yielded a continuous score for moderate physical aggression. The six-item severe physical aggression continuous score included kicked, bit, or hit you with a fist; hit or tried to hit you with something; beat you or hit you for a number of minutes; choked you; threatened you with a

knife or gun; and used a knife or fired a gun. The Cronbach's alpha for the CTS for this sample was .89. Scores above the mean in each of the subscales represented high frequencies of abuse in dichotomous variables that were created for analysis.

Alcohol consumption. One question was taken from the Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents (DICA; Reich, Herjanic, Welner, & Gandhy, 1982) and was used to measure the quantity of alcohol consumption of the respondents and their intimate partners as reported by the participants. Quantity was coded as abstinent (0 = never/none), moderate (1 = ≤ three drinks at any one time), and heavy (2 = ≥ four drinks at any one time). In much demographic and survey research, quantity of drinking on any one occasion is seen as indicative of a potential drinking problem more than is frequency (with low quantities, for instance).

Social support. Ten items from Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsey's (1981) Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors were used to assess the level of social support experienced by the respondents. A principal components analysis yielded two constructs, emotional and instrumental social support, accounting for 26% and 47% of the variance, respectively (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Shelter use. In 1990, women were asked to indicate if they had ever used battered women's shelter services as a method to cope with abuse, and some were also interviewed in a shelter that confirmed their use.

Economic independence. Current employment status at Time 1 was used as the measure of economic independence. This was further dichotomized as employed (full- or part-time) versus unemployed.

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 10.0 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) was used to analyze quantitative data. Whereas means and proportions yielded descriptive statistics, chi-square tests were used for bivariate analysis. Event history analysis, specifically Kaplan-Meier and Cox proportional hazards regression models, were used to model the hazards of women leaving abusive relationships in multivariate analysis. Time was measured in months and was treated as approximately continuous. Women were considered to be at risk for leaving from the start of the relationship until the time of departure or censoring by the Time 3 survey

date. A dichotomous variable was created to denote departure status (0 = remaining in relationship; 1 = departing relationship) and was used in the regression analysis.

Model building was undertaken in three steps. Whereas the first model included all the variables, the second model comprised those that emerged significant in Model 1. Additionally, interactions of independent variables with abuse were explored. A final model (Model 3) retained only variables that were significant in Model 2.

Results

Descriptive findings. Table 2 provides an overview of the kinds of abuse, shelter use, and alcohol use patterns among the respondents and their partners. As can be seen in Table 2, respondents had been involved with their abusers for an average of 8 years ($SD = 5.4$) before being interviewed in 1990. Women had experienced nonabusive periods during their relationships ($M = 2$ years, $SD = 3.4$ years). Women in the study had experienced high frequencies of moderate physical aggression ($M = 33.3$, $SD = 24.0$). Fifty-five percent used shelters in their communities to cope with violence. The majority of the women (56%) were moderate drinkers, whereas 68.7% of them reported having partners who were heavy drinkers. The majority of women (71%) had exited abusive relationships by the end of the study period.

Bivariate analyses. In general, women with fewer resources relied on shelters. For example, 72% of unemployed women as compared to 28% of those employed full- or part-time used shelters at some point to cope with the abuse ($\chi^2 = 4.152$, $df = 1$, $p = .032$). Shelter use was significantly associated with breaking off an abusive relationship. Among women who used shelters, 81.8% had exited abusive relationships by Wave 3 in contrast to those (57.8%) who reported no shelter use ($\chi^2 = 6.947$, $df = 1$, $p = .008$).

Multivariate analysis. Event history analysis was used to explore the timing of departure from abusive relationships. The Kaplan-Meier and Cox regression models were used to analyze those variables that distinguished women at risk for ending their relationship during the 10-year study period.

In univariate Kaplan-Meier analysis, three variables significantly associated with the time to exit abusive relationships: age (Log Rank = 8.21, $p = .016$), respondent's alcohol consumption (Log Rank = 8.19, $p = .017$), and moderate physical aggression (Log Rank = 6.05, $p = .014$). Unadjusted Cox models also revealed identical findings in which age, respondent's alcohol

Table 2
Descriptive Findings

	Frequency (<i>N</i> = 100)
Whether left or stayed with abusive partners	
Left	71
Stayed	29
Length of relationship	Mean: 2.05 years (<i>SD</i> = 3.4)
≤ 7.99 years	54
8–11 years	21
≥ 12 years	24
Length of violence-free relationship	Mean: 2.0 years (<i>SD</i> = 5.4)
Shelter Use	
Not used shelter	45
Used shelter	55
Frequency of moderate physical aggression	Mean: 33.3 (<i>SD</i> = 24.0)
Scores ≤ 33	58
Scores ≥ 34	42

consumption, and moderate physical aggression emerged significant (see Table 3). Shelter use approached significance in both Kaplan-Meier (Log Rank = 3.61, $p = .057$) and unadjusted Cox models ($p = .056$).

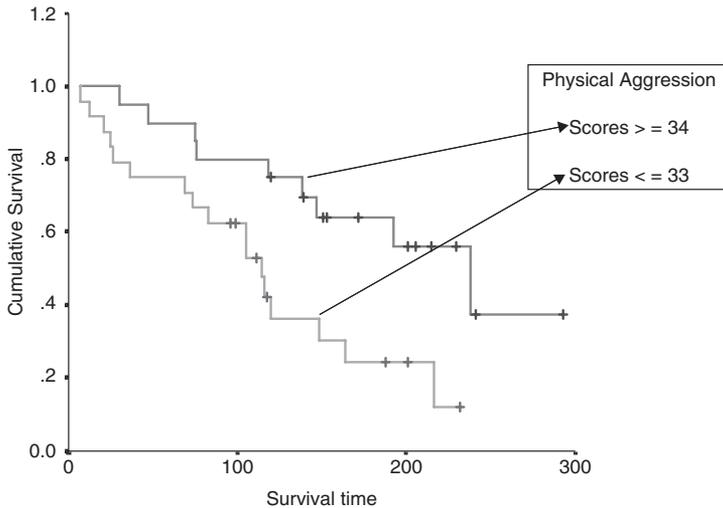
Table 3 depicts the hierarchy of variables entered into the model, including relative hazards (RH) for each of the variables for unadjusted and adjusted models. All variables were entered into the equation in Model 1. Five variables were statistically significant—age, ethnicity, respondents' alcohol consumption, partners' alcohol consumption, and moderate physical aggression. In particular, the hazards of leaving abusive relationships for older women (RH: 1.08; 95% CI: 1.01, 1.15) and Anglo women (RH: 2.16; 95% CI: 1.22, 3.80) were higher than for younger women and women belonging to ethnic minorities. Drinking patterns were tested in two ways: (a) abstinence versus heavy and moderate drinking and (b) abstinence and moderate drinking versus heavy drinking. The second pattern contrasting those who had no real drinking problem (abstainers or light drinkers) to those who potentially did (more than four drinks on any one occasion) related to whether women exited the relationship. The hazards were significantly higher for the women (RH: 2.83; 95% CI: 1.42, 5.63) and those with partners who consumed four or more drinks at any given time (3.32; 95% CI: 1.51, 7.30). Finally, compared to those who experienced lower frequencies of physical aggression, the hazards of leaving were lower for women experiencing higher frequencies of moderate physical aggression (RH: 0.98; 95% CI: .96, 1.00).

Table 3
Cox Regression Models of Variables Related to Timing
of Departure From Abusive Relationships

Variable	Unadjusted Cox Models (95% CI)	Model 1 Relative Hazards (95% CI)	Model 2 Relative Hazards (95% C)	Model 3 Relative Hazards (95% CI)
Age of respondent	1.07* (1.08, 1.14)	1.08* (1.01, 1.15)	1.07* (1.00, 1.14)	1.07* (1.00, 1.14)
Ethnicity (Anglo vs. Other)	.67 (.42, 1.07)	2.16* (1.22, 3.80)	2.15* (1.23, 3.77)	2.30* (1.33, 3.97)
Respondent education	.98 (.89, 1.07)	.98 (.87, 1.09)		
Number of children	.87 (.72, 1.05)	.92 (.75, 1.05)		
Length of relationship	1.99 (.91, 1.07)	1.03 (.92, 1.15)	1.02 (.91, 1.15)	
Employment status	1.08 (.66, 1.75)	.85 (.50, 1.47)	.92 (.54, 1.55)	
Whether used shelter	1.59** (.98, 2.60) (.86, 5.18)	.98 (.57, 1.70)	2.14 (.83, 5.52)	2.11
Respondent's alcohol consumption				
a) Drinkers (≤ 3 & ≥ 4) vs. nondrinkers	1.08 (.62, 1.91)	1.61 (.72, 3.62)	1.64 (.72, 3.72)	1.76 (.83, 3.72)
b) Nondrinkers (≤ 3 vs. ≥ 4)	2.32* (1.26, 4.25)	2.83* (1.42, 5.63)	2.97* (1.49, 5.89)	3.01* (1.53, 5.89)
Partner's alcohol consumption				
a) Drinkers (≤ 3 & ≥ 4) vs. nondrinkers	1.23 (.46, 3.26)	1.57 (.50, 4.85)	1.68 (.56, 5.02)	1.48 (.51, 4.30)
b) Nondrinkers (≤ 3 vs. ≥ 4)	1.81 (.97, 3.35)	3.32* (1.51, 7.30)	3.59* (1.63, 7.87)	3.04* (1.48, 6.20)
Emotional social support	1.05 (.59, 1.89)	1.05 (.59, 1.89)		
Instrumental social support	1.05 (.65, 1.69)	1.07 (.60, 1.89)	1.25 (.72, 2.18)	
Verbal and nonverbal aggression	1.00 (.98, 1.00)	1.00 (.98, 1.00)		
Moderate physical aggression	.99* (.98, 1.00)	.98* (.96, .99)	.99 (.98, 1.00)	.99 (.98, 1.00)
Severe physical aggression	1.00 (.99, 1.00)	1.00 (.99, 1.01)		
Interaction between moderate physical aggression and shelter use			.98* (.95, .99)	.98* (.96, .99)

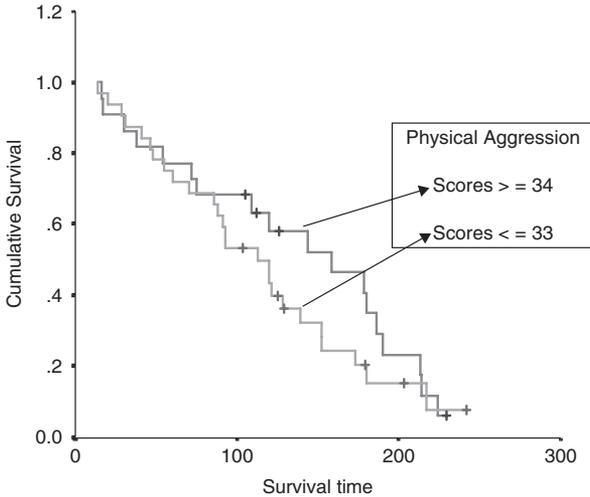
* $p < .05$; ** $p = .056$.

Figure 1
Kaplan-Meier Survival Curves of Women Who Did Not Use Shelter



Because verbal and nonverbal aggression and severe physical aggression subscales were not significant in bivariate analyses, unadjusted Cox Models, or adjusted Cox Model 1, they were excluded from Model 2. Only moderate physical aggression was retained in Model 2. Similarly, only instrumental social support was retained for exploratory purposes, and emotional social support was excluded. Educational level of respondents and number of children were also excluded from Model 2 for the above mentioned reasons. Interaction terms were introduced into the model to explore possible interactions between women's abuse experiences and other independent variables. Again, age, ethnicity, and alcohol consumption levels of women and their partners were significantly associated with women's departures from abusive relationships. A significant interaction was observed between moderate physical aggression and shelter use ($p = .03$). To further analyze the direction of the moderate-physical-aggression frequency and shelter use interaction, a Kaplan-Meier survival analysis (Figures 1 and 2) was performed looking at the relationship between shelter use and the time until leaving for different levels of frequency of moderate

Figure 2
Kaplan-Meier Survival Curves of Women Who Used Shelter



physical aggression. The analysis pointed to significant differences between women who used shelter and those who did not access shelter services (Log Rank = 5.45, $df = 1$, $p = .019$). Among women who did not use shelter, those with lower scores of moderate physical aggression had lower survival times compared to those who experienced higher frequencies of abuse. On the other hand, for women who used shelter, the survival time of those who had lower and higher frequency scores of moderate physical aggression was almost equal. In the final parsimonious Model 3 (excluding all the non-significant variables), the results remained consistent.

Discussion

Our study is unique in providing long-term information on abused women and their relationship status. The sample also provided a unique chance to test the benefits of battered women's shelters, because about half of the women had used shelter services. The women who did use shelter

services were different from those women who did not use shelter in that they were generally poor and much more likely to be unemployed. Despite such economic obstacles, women who derived support from shelters were much more likely to be out of the violent relationship than women who remained with the abusers, according to initial bivariate tests. When examined in multivariate analyses, the main effect of shelter use diminished, and four additional variables gained significance: age, ethnicity, woman's alcohol use, and partner's alcohol use. But shelter use once again surfaced as an important indicator when used in an interaction term with the frequency of physical aggression.

Our findings indicate that shelters provide a vital means of support for abused women. Women who experience low levels of abuse and fail to access shelters will leave at the same rate as those who access shelters. But women facing high levels of abuse are especially vulnerable. Men who escalate their violent tactics succeed in preventing women from exiting.

Our findings indicate that women who are the most severely abused and have no contact with shelters take the longest to leave if they leave at all. This finding suggests that some abused women may be in special danger, and we may need to rethink some of our strategies for outreach to extend services to this group. Culturally competent social work practice also emerges as an important priority when intervening with abused women from varied ethnic groups, especially one that needs to transcend mere awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge to advocating commitment against racism and oppression against minority groups (Campbell & Campbell, 1996).

On the other hand, we acknowledge the variety of outcomes that might leave a woman violence-free but do not entail separation. Our analysis was limited to women's departure, and we cannot comment whether in some cases, the men had desisted from violence either because of interventions or during the natural course of the relationship. Qualitative research in particular could illuminate these facets of abusive relationships. Another limitation of our study is that we are unable to provide information on whether women were revictimized because of their departure, as has been shown in earlier studies (Campbell, Miller, Cardwell, & Belknap 1994; Fluery, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000).

Women who drink or are likely to have a drinking problem (more than four drinks on any given occasion) and women with drinking partners leave their relationships sooner than women who either abstain or are light drinkers. It is unsurprising that women whose partners drink heavily leave the relationship; men with drinking problems may bring relatively little to

the relationship, are potentially adverse influences on the children, and present even more problems than men who are only abusive. It is somewhat more surprising that women who drink exit earlier, because they are potentially more dependent on a partner. On the other hand, who initiated the breakup is unknown, and it is very possible that women with drinking problems are more quickly abandoned by abusive partners than are sober women. One important point to our findings is that women who are abused and who drink heavily are often from overlapping clinical populations but rarely receive truly overlapping services (Downs, Miller, & Panek, 1993). That is, women who present to a domestic violence agency with abuse but who also have a substance use problem rarely receive a full assessment or promise of referrals for treatment, and women who enter treatment for alcohol or drugs may receive assessment for partner violence but often find it difficult to obtain advocacy when referred from treatment venues. Our findings show that drinking on the part of both the woman and the partner is implicated in the woman's long-term outcome, over and above demographic and psychological variables that are more often examined (cf. Strube & Barbour, 1983).

In summary, decisions about staying in or exiting abusive relationships encompass a plethora of complex, intertwined factors. The current study highlights a number of factors that could be vital in influencing abused women's decisions and that could serve as guidelines for professionals intervening with abused women. Not only are static variables critical, but also even more important are the underlying interactions between various factors in addition to the type of formal alternatives available to abused women on an ongoing basis. In addition to quantitative replications, future exploratory research needs to address the specific mechanisms that help women to cope, evaluate alternatives, and finally, exit abusive relationships. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that leaving may not symbolize the end of all struggles for abused women, and choosing to remain with the abuser does not mean passivity on the part of women. Measuring desirable outcomes for women needs to be viewed in the context of incremental changes that abused women make continually with an aim to resolve their victimization.

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