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# “The Strongest Women”: Exploration of the Inner Resources of Abused Women

Ruth E. Davis

*Domestic violence is reaching epidemic proportions and is designated a national health crisis in the United States. Yet, the stories of abused women and their experiences are only just recently appearing in the literature. The use of coping strategies in dealing with abusive intimate partners is one such area that invites further research. Using the phenomenological method, 17 volunteers discuss their inner resources for surviving abusive experiences and developing ways to protect themselves in future relationships. Women's accounts of abuse experiences add depth to what is known about their strength and portray them as survivors rather than as victims. Future research is called for that adds to the understanding of the inner resources attributed to the women in the study findings.*

**D**omestic violence is often explored in ways that characterize abused women as helpless victims. Yet, a popular poem among abused women by Veronica Shoffstall (1971) demonstrates their strength:

And you learn you really can endure  
That you really are strong  
That you really have worth  
And you learn and learn  
With every good-bye you learn.<sup>1</sup>

Although the abilities of abused women to create and use inner resources is not emphasized in the literature, some research has found highly effective inner resources among the same population.

In the United States, at least 4 million women are abused each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000), with assault being the single major cause of injury to women (Attala, 1996). Currently, a body of knowledge is emerging that concerns abused women and the complex issues surrounding domestic violence. Interdisciplinary in nature, this literature contains both quantitative and qualitative research findings providing a developing base by which to understand domestic violence issues. These include issues of universal screening (Houry, Feldhaus, Nyquist, Abbott, & Pons, 1999; McLeer, Anwar, Herman, & Macquiling, 1989; Reid

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& Glasser, 1997; Spedding, McWilliams, McNicholl, & Dearden, 1999), health care issues of abused women (Campbell, Kub, Belknap, & Templin, 1997; Campbell, Kub, & Rose, 1996; Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Humphreys, 1997; Vinton, Altholz, & Lobell-Boesch, 1997), issues of power and oppression (Brown, 1997; Burgess & Roberts, 1996; Varcoe, 1996), and a beginning literature from the qualitative paradigm on the experiences of abused women.

Landenburger's (1993) now classic study provided a way to view a model of the influences of abusive experiences on a woman's views of self. Using grounded theory, Wuest (1999) described the process of "not going back" using active resistance. Ulrich (1991) discussed the process of reclaiming self and the importance of support programs in her study with abused women. Within all of these studies, the need for continued research with abused women regarding how they left abusive relationships, and what enabled them to leave, is underscored repeatedly.

First described by Lazarus (1993), coping strategies are developed by individuals throughout life in response to stressful events. Successful resolution of stressful life events is due to active attempts to mediate them. These are defined as "a complex set of processes that may moderate influences of stressful life events on the individual's physical and mental health" (Lu & Chen, 1996, p. 298). Problem solving and the ability to use social support systems are two of these. Coping strategies can also be described as inner and external resources. Inner resources, such as resilience, are cited as among the most valuable for dealing with stressful situations. As Barbieri (1996) noted, "If we are able to turn our focus inward upon ourselves for understanding, we may find we are our own best support resource" (p. 4).

Resilience, as an inner resource, is the ability to succeed in the face of adversity (Neal, Park, Dioconis, & Omotosho, 1997; Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). Resilience results from a person's ability to make meaning out of stressful events and to activate internal resources to resolve stress-laden issues (Christopher, 2000). Factors that contribute to resilience include informal social support systems, a sense of spirituality, and a sense of hope (Todd & Worrell, 2000; Valentine and Feinauer, 1993). Although described as three separate concepts, these overlap significantly.

The importance of supportive relationships for abused women is significant, as they assist women in developing a sense of being connected, which in turn gives women strength (Landenburger, 1989; Ulrich, 1998). Lu and Chen (1996) found that of all coping behaviors, the development of social supports had the most influence on positive adaptation. In fact, the lack of supportive networks might contribute to negative responses of women to an abusive experience (Landenburger, 1989).

The spirituality associated with resilience is concerned with learning about self and finding meaning in life events. Clark and Heidenreich (1995) found that concepts such as a search for hope and meaning in life contribute to spiritual well-being. Elements of spirituality include making meaning out of a situation, clarifying inner knowledge of self, and understanding connections with others (Burkhardt, 1994). In one study, Humphreys (2000) discovered that abused women find spiritual values and beliefs beneficial in striving toward recovery.

The elements of hope overlap with spirituality and social networks. Hope, or a sense of direction, provides meaning and a reason for being. Through hope, a better quality of life can be achieved. Furthermore, Post-White et al. (1996) found that hope can be nurtured through caring relationships with others and through the development and maintenance of spirituality.

Inner resources are critical to adaptive responses to stressful life events and have been explored in a variety of research studies on coping with painful life experiences (Livneh, 2000; Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000; Spira & Kenemore, 2000; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999; Thoits, 1995; Valentiner, Foa, Riggs, & Gershuny; 1996). Rose's (1990) study of women's inner strengths emphasized the importance of examining women's experiences for successful characteristics rather than dismissing certain traits as weaknesses. In addition, Lempert (1996) alluded to the strategies abused women acquire in coping with violent relationships. Yet, how these are employed by abused women is not extensively presented in the literature (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000).

McMurray (1997) appealed for research with and about abused women that "reflect[s] multiple perspectives and the varied configurations of family life" (p. 554). Brown (1997) asserted that much is not known about how abused women survive and subsequently make positive changes in their lives and called for research that examines their survival strategies. The need for research that examines an abused woman's insights and how she manages to cope with intimate partner violence is underscored in the literature (Brown, 1997; Jones, 1994). This is best accomplished by talking with the women themselves (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000), exploring how they endured abusive relationships. Most important, women's perspectives about what is meaningful to them and how they coped are essential to gaining a more complete understanding of abuse experiences (Ulrich, 1991). In this article, I report the findings of a research study with abused women that contributes to what is known about their coping strategies. The women's voices underscore the inner resources they used for coping with and making meaning out of experiences with an abusive intimate partner.

## METHOD

Phenomenology is the method best suited to providing women with a voice about their experiences. Positioned in philosophy and methodology, phenomenology endorses participants' perspectives (Munhall, 1994). In this study, the transcendental orientation identified with Husserl is the most evident (van Manen, 2000). A phenomenology of consciousness, transcendental phenomenology is concerned with how meaning is formed through perceptions of events (van Manen, 2000). Allowing individuals a voice about an experience provides them with opportunities to give it meaning through its examination (Husserl, 1962). Ultimately, the meaning of an experience acquires a place in the realm of a human life, which then not only informs the listener, but also helps participants to ascribe it to a more harmonious place in their lives.

Socially, abused women might not be allowed to discuss abusive experiences openly with others. Often viewed as shaming, the experiences of an abused woman are rarely shared with others unless a connection with a trusted listener exists. Yet, these perspectives are not only valuable to understanding how women survive abuse and inform further research and practice, they also provide the women with a sanctioned vehicle by which to explore, share, and validate their feelings and insights that otherwise would not have occurred. Ulrich (1993) emphasizes, "We cannot talk about women leaving or staying in abusive situations without understanding those situations from the view of the women" (p. 387).

## Procedures

The Amendment to the Protection from Abuse Act of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1995) provided the definition of abuse used for this study. This definition includes behaviors such as physical violence, rape, financial control, social isolation, and threats. Before the study commenced, I obtained approval from the University Research Review Committee. All participants were volunteers and received explanations of the study, including its purpose and intent. Each participant provided verbal and signed consent to participate in the study. Monetary compensation was not provided for participation, but the women received contact information for further assistance or support services, as indicated.

## Sample

I sought a purposive sample of women through criterion-based, network, and convenience sampling strategies. First, all participants had to identify themselves as adult women who had abusive experiences in intimate partner relationships and who were willing to share these experiences. Potential participants came through word-of-mouth or network sampling. For this study, community leaders and other influential women acted as gatekeepers, putting me in touch with women who wished to participate. Some of these same women volunteered to participate in the study, although I did not know at the time of contact that they had had an experience with domestic violence. A few of the participants came through associates at shelters that provided assistance to abused women, or agencies that provided support services to women for a variety of needs. The common denominator with all participants was that they were willing to talk and felt compelled to tell their stories, as they perceived a thick societal silence that did not permit discussion of abusive experiences. Convenience sampling was used only to the extent that I sought participants in my home state.

## Data Collection

The first encounter with a participant was either through a telephone conversation or in person, to verify willingness to engage in the study. These conversations of about 30 to 60 minutes established a connection with the participant. In addition, I provided details about the study and obtained initial verbal consent. I assured confidentiality and protection of participants' identities, contacting them at a telephone number where they felt most comfortable receiving calls. Materials were sent by mail only with the permission of the participant.

During this initial contact, I set up dates and times to conduct the interview with the participant. Most of the interviews took place in either the participant's or my home. Written consent was obtained at this first face-to-face meeting. Audio-taped interviews ran between 2 and 4 hours, and they were the primary method used to obtain the women's stories of surviving abuse.

The interview comprised three general areas. First, each woman was asked to provide a background of the abusive relationship. This framework helped me to understand, from the women's perspectives, how past events shaped their lives.

Second, the women were asked about the helpfulness of outside resources. These included questions about lawyers, ministers and priests, health care providers, police, and social workers, among others. Interwoven into each of these topic areas were questions about how the woman dealt with issues particular to her own experiences. Last, each woman was asked to provide personal reflections on the abuse experience. Throughout the interviews, I acted as a facilitator, interrupting only to clarify points and to refocus the interview. After the interview, audiotapes were transcribed, and a copy was sent to the participant. Included was a cover letter requesting any further explanatory details she wished to add to the transcribed interview. A third session followed, in which the participants were contacted by telephone to clarify the content of the transcripts. At times, participants added details recalled since the audiotaped interviews. Many participants mailed copies of poems, journal entries, and other writings to further illustrate their perspective of the abusive experience.

### Data Analysis

Audiotapes and written materials, including the transcripts, were coded with numbers, the key to which remained in my home office. Any information that could potentially identify a participant was removed from the transcripts before they were printed into hard copies. In addition, I used a systematic method of assigning fictitious first names to each participant's coded transcript. All participants desiring a summary of the findings of the study were mailed a copy.

Trustworthiness of the research was assured through credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A colleague acting as an external auditor verified emerging themes by reading through transcripts without identifying information (Mathison, 1988). In addition, I used materials collected during the study to substantiate appropriate data analysis and to demonstrate that the findings were credible. These included field notes, letters, notes, and the maintenance of a journal. An audit trail was initiated through these materials, which further assured confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main data for this study were the transcribed interviews. I also used field notes, observations, and investigator journal entries during data analysis to ensure trustworthiness of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Data collection and analysis were conducted at the same time, to best "see" the development of themes from participants' eyes. I hand-sorted the transcribed interview data, coding expressions that illustrated how participants reached into themselves in dealing with abusive experiences. This involved reading and rereading each transcript until the essences of common data were discovered. These were then grouped into categories of similar data, which informed the development of themes. Other materials collected during the study were organized with each theme. During this process, I discussed developing themes with participants to ensure credibility, encouraging them to provide further detail and feedback. The themes became the findings of the study, in which the women's voices are used extensively to best describe their perceptions of inner resources.

## FINDINGS

Seventeen women with abuse experiences volunteered to participate in the study. Ten of the 17 were divorced from abusive spouses. Of these, four were involved in successful second marriages. Only two of the women had never been married. The women ranged in age from 27 to 56 years ( $\bar{x} = 43.4$  years). Some of the women were professionals. Years of education completed ranged from 8 to 22 years ( $\bar{x} = 14.7$  years). All but one woman had completed at least a high school education. Individual annual incomes ranged from \$2,000 to \$75,000 ( $\bar{x} = \$30,411$ ). These income amounts do not include the financial contributions of significant others. Two of the women with low income were second-degree students at the time of the research and were not working full-time. Occupations included artists, accountants, social workers, office managers, corporate executives, and teachers in higher education. Of the 17 women, 13 were Euro-American, which is typical of the demographics of this state. Four women were immigrants within the last 10 years. Two of these were from Latin America, and two were from Eastern Europe.

The period away from the abuser varied from 3 months to a few years. Through the participants's stories, it became apparent that the process of leave-taking and terminating the relationship with the abuser are not always the same events. Children were the most common reason for this variance. As six of the women had children with their abusive husbands, continued communication was often unavoidable. Although these encounters could be highly stressful, the women did not feel as though their safety was jeopardized. Only one of the 17 participants remains in an abusive relationship. At the time this study took place, she was contemplating ending the relationship.

All of the women but one experienced physical abuse that ranged from pushing and shoving to actual hitting with hands and objects. All of the women reported mental, verbal, and emotional abuse, which included belittling comments; degrading remarks; and controlling, manipulative behaviors. Many of the women reported alcohol and/or drug use by intimate partners. Sexual abuse was experienced by 6 of the 17 women. In three cases, the women's daughters were sexually molested by the abuser.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared perspectives that characterized inner resources and portrayed the immense challenge leaving and consequently healing from abusive relationships entail. These inner resources are grouped as the themes of strength and survival, resilience, and self-protection. All three themes are descriptive of the control that women sought to regain or retain self-identity plus emotional, mental, and physical safety. Although strength enabled the women to terminate abusive relationships, it also enabled them to stay when leaving might have posed a greater threat to their survival and their children's. Resilient women used hope, spirituality, a sense of humor, and support systems to survive. Women also developed self-protection, which was ongoing and persistent. These themes are not meant to be sequential and, actually, many participants exhibited characteristics of each simultaneously.

### Learning to Use Strength, Learning to Survive

In this theme, the women describe how they survived and persisted, many over the course of many years, working toward a future goal that would enable a break from the abusive relationship. Primarily, they used the term *strength* to describe an inner quality that facilitated working through abusive experiences. Here, Melinda emphasizes what she perceives as one of the most meaningful inner resources abused women develop. Often, this means employing manipulative behaviors on their part to ensure safety. These manipulative behaviors include being strongly attuned to the disposition of the abuser.

I've always said that I think battered women are some of the, and have to be, the strongest there are. Not that women are not strong, because they are, they are the stronger sex. They really are. They have to be. But battered women are the strongest women. And nobody will ever change my mind with that. We've had to learn how to survive. We're conniving, we'll do whatever it takes, however long it takes, to get what we need or want to take care of ourselves.

The idea of being abused elicits a number of emotions. Yet, Willa emphasizes the strength that abused women develop through interactions with abusive partners. In addition, all of the participants emphasized that they are survivors, which means that even though the experiences are more than the human mind might be able to comprehend, hope and strength were constant attributes throughout.

There is an incredible, incredible strength. It's there. It's really and truly there in the most broken woman that is just totally falling apart and feels like she can't survive another day without having someone in her life, even if it's somebody that abuses them. When you dig through all that, you find that there is either an incredible strength in what they have been able to do with their children or with their job or how they help another human being. And it's just that being abused and being a victim of abuse doesn't mean that there isn't hope. I mean they're survivors. It just needs to be brought out in the right way and it needs to be encouraged. And that's how it was with me.

Elsie talks about using "common sense" to find help and notes that every woman is susceptible to abuse regardless of her circumstances.

So, what I was doing basically was using my own common sense to get through stuff and I'll tell you another thing, I never ever sat around saying poor little me. I never did. Because to me, no one is immune from this, nobody, not even me.

Most of the women developed a plan of escape, or a safety net for survival, hoping for a time that the plan could be enacted. For some women, this entailed hiding minuscule amounts of money over a long period. In the following narrative, Greer describes the development of her "safety net" for survival. By hoarding money, she finally was able to enact her plan, leaving with her teenage son.

I was taking care of it . . . and it would be like if I got an expense check, I'd put it in [my bank account]. I mean it probably had 200 dollars in it. But I decided that I was never gonna be caught. I had to go back to him that night. I mean I had no choice. I had no car. I had no clothing, I had no access to my home. Um, I was just totally,



totally lost. And so I decided I would never not have that safety net. Now, would 200 dollars keep it? I don't know. But, that's all I cared about.

Along with hiding money, Isabel included her friends and family, keeping them informed of her plans to leave when she could. In addition, she emphasized her determination and immense will power in making plans to leave, talks about her plans to leave, ending the relationship with her abusive husband:

So, as those things were happening I was getting stronger inside. And I knew there was a way, you know, where there's a will, there's a way. If you need to do something, you're going to get it done. And so I didn't prepare myself that much, except to keep my friends and my mom updated. And just to hide the money. And I knew I was going to do it. I knew there was going to come a day, and I guess I just had my mind set that I'll know when I have to leave.

Some of the participants found that obtaining additional education and skills would provide an opportunity for leaving. Involvement toward a goal through a program of study provided women with an important focus that enabled them to subsequently proceed with a plan to leave. Also, women emphasized that they felt schooling was one area the abuser could neither intrude in nor control. As one woman said, her program of study in accounting was "something that only belongs to me." In Leona's case, her involvement in a strenuous graduate program defined her until, ultimately, she could find a way out of the relationship.

I never stopped studying, 'cause I love to do these things. And so I was definitely better prepared for graduate school. So you can imagine that I thought I had better stay away with my "little problem," compared to these others. I remember always saying, "OK, better concentrate on studying. If I want to be noticed, I'd better be noticed by studying." That's what I did.

Many women described vivid details of how each abusive incident would occur, what was likely to set it off, and how to get it over with. Last, Elsie describes how not reacting to physical abuse enabled her to survive after a 15-year abusive relationship with her husband. It is important that in Elsie's situation, her strength enabled her to use the legal system to "fight back" and terminate the relationship.

And he would just up and slap me. And for a long time I took it. And after many years of it, your body just doesn't react whether you want to or not. You don't think about it. For the longest time, I would just stand with my arms down and let it happen. Because what I found out later is if you put your hands up, to defend yourself or whatever, he'd make it worse. It would make it worse. So, what you really learn to do is just stand there and take it. 'Cause it's gonna be over faster if you do. OK. But, in the end, I started to fight back.

### **Learning to Be Resilient**

In this theme, women describe various strategies, characteristic of resilience, that helped them deal with abuse. Often, these resources enabled women not only to endure and survive but also to leave and successfully disengage from the abusive spouse. These include spirituality, a sense of humor, use of support systems, hope, and finding something in their lives that belonged to them exclusively.

All of the participants used a sense of humor at moments throughout the interviews and also talked about how a sense of humor helped them not to think too much about the future, which for many seemed very bleak. They talked about creating an atmosphere that enabled them to live in the moment and, for at least a brief period, not to be afraid.

Many women talked about the importance of spirituality in their lives, helping them live beyond abusive relationships. Some women talked about the importance of God in their lives, taking life a day at a time. In addition, many women possessed strong beliefs that, in the end, God would protect them. As Susan noted,

I have unshakable faith, truly. I don't just believe things, I know them. I don't live in a belief system. I know, I know. I talk to God a lot. God's like my bud. There's not a big separation. That's who I go to talk to.

The women also talked about the ability to mobilize outside resources in obtaining help through an abusive relationship. These included family members, friends, and community resources. These resources helped women see that freedom from abuse was possibility. Often, they described available services as a way to escape. Elsie also talked about the importance of a longtime friend, who helped her validate her self-worth and was instrumental in helping her deal with the abusive relationship.

She [friend] was the one who kept me at some kind of a level place, this isn't you, this is him, this is his problem, this is his sickness. He's the one that's not well, he's telling you you're crazy, but you're not. And so forth. So, she's the one that basically just kind of was able to keep me on an even keel that way. 'Cause she knew me for years and years and years so she knows the person that I am. So she was able to use my qualities and bring them to my own attention.

In addition to friends, other women used community agencies to work through the details of getting a place to live and obtaining a job or legal help. Willa talked about the supportive network at the local YWCA, which helped her to leave. Elsie discovered resources through a shelter for abused women that she previously did not know existed, such as legal aid to obtain a protection from abuse order. She also engaged in a group that met regularly to problem-solve issues related to abuse. Through her narrative, she emphasizes her ability to get things done on her own.

Normally, I'm not that kind of a person, it's hard for me to go out and ask for help. Or it's hard for me to even accept help because I'm just so used to making my way and not having to accept things . . . I'm always the giver, do you know what I'm saying? And so, through this I've learned, there's just times when I need help too, I'm a person too.

Yet, through the experience of abuse she realizes that outside agencies offer informational resources that can prove invaluable.

You figure they can't help, nobody can help with this, but they have all this stuff, all this information for you, and so, that's what I've been trying to do, is just tap into everything that I can possibly tap into. I'm trying to tap into every resource that's available to me as I find out about it. Because I just figure, if I'm going to get through

this, and if I'm going to get over this, then I need to use what's available. And there's so much that's available that I didn't even know about.

Although Faith talked with supportive family members frequently, she also sought professional counseling to help her break free of the abusive relationship:

I think you do have to kind of try to find some kind of network, if you will, or support system of people that you can call that won't get tired of hearing you talk about it. 'Cause I used to pity my family. My poor family. I can't call my mother one more time and cry and tell her . . . You know, there's just low days where I would call her, pick up the phone and say, "Mom, you know." And, I think, oh, gosh, I gotta stop. So that's when I felt too, I need to go back for more counseling, which I did for a while. I thought I needed someone objective and not burdened, because I felt like I was burdening them. I truly did.

Dina had been in and out of an abusive relationship for years. Through a long, agonizing process of stopping and starting over, she was finally able to activate agencies that could provide her with specific help and sustain termination. Using the Yellow Pages® of the telephone book, Dina set out to make a new situation that was hers alone, using these external resources in accomplishing that goal. Through this process, she characterizes great determination and resourcefulness.

I started, as soon as he walked out those doors, I said, "It's time to network right now! I'm not going to be sitting in a place, not knowing anybody but his family. I'm not going to be sitting in a place where I am doing basically nothing but being at his beck and call. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to create a situation of my very own and I'm going for it." And that's exactly what I did, marching through the Yellow Pages. What do I want out of this town? Where do I need to go? I went to the welfare office almost immediately. Everything I did was almost immediately. As soon as he left. That's it, it's time to go. It's time to start rolling. It's time to hang on to this house. It's time to talk to the landlord, get him the proper paperwork so that he never returns again. It's time for this, this, and this and everything else. Everything.

### Learning to Protect Self

In this theme, women talked about delving within themselves for protection. Often, these are boundaries that the women have subsequently formed because of what they learned during years in an abusive relationship. The formation of new boundaries is part of a self-discovery process that is a significant part of healing. Also, the development of attentiveness through intuition or "vibes" was fundamental in protecting the self in new relationships. For women, using intuition is critical, as women are highly dependent on intuition for much of their emotional well-being and protection from those who would harm them. Dina describes her intuition as a physical feeling that informs her about potentially abusive situations:

And if my stomach gives me a funny feeling about someone, or no matter where I am, I listen to it. I listen to it immediately now. It's not, well I'm going to question this a few more hundred times anymore to kind of break through that feeling. No, no. I listen to my stomach and you're done. Or this situation isn't right. And I go with it. And not only that, I fight for myself.

Some women talked about “red flags” that warned them of potentially abusive behaviors. Selena emphasizes her intuition physical vibrations she can pick up from people who might be threatening her safety. These feelings were important to her, as they enabled her safety and self-protection:

I have vibes now being around people. I can really tell. You know, I have an intuition about people who are, who are abusive I think, which is a good thing . . . And I wasn't going out with anybody that had a hidden agenda. I stayed away from anybody I had any of those feelings toward, you know . . . But also in my mind, I was fine being single. Many times I said to myself that you know, I would rather be happy single for the rest of my life than just settle for somebody else just because I want to get married.

Over the period of years of abuse that each woman sustained, they described mental lists of danger signs that subsequent partners need to “pass.” For Susan, each of her relationships is described as peeling away layers of an onion. Through this process, she describes an alertness to warning signs of controlling behavior in a relationship.

Each awful abusive relationship has, because there were so many, it's really like it's a f— onion. So many layers. So many ways to abuse somebody. So many insidious, subtle, you know those really see-through layers on the onion? Those sticky little see-through layers. I mean each relationship has peeled away another one that I see how I allowed . . . I watch that very carefully in subsequent relationships. I watch.

In protecting themselves from potentially abusive partners, other women developed certain criteria that signal them about possibly dangerous situations. In essence, women engaged in new relationships tested each new person on certain criteria, sometimes with direct questioning.

Willa talks about self-protection as part of caring for self:

I am much more protective of myself, and what feels good to me and what doesn't feel good, and what I will put up with and what I will not put up with. And certainly the type of qualities I look for in someone that I want to have a relationship with have changed drastically. And I don't feel anymore like I have to just settle, that I have to pick and choose. I have to take care of myself. I think that's the main thing that I keep telling myself every day. I have to be able to take care of myself. But I think really being just very particular about who I have in my life, and who is adding to my life or complementing my life and who is tearing me down. Even if it's you know, members of my family, I've just learned that I don't need to put up with it. I don't need to put up with it. I don't need to have it in my life. And, it's not worth it.

The women described how love of self was a very long process that enabled them to heal from years of abusive treatment from intimate partners. Often, women talked about learning not to look for love of self or safety in another person, but rather finding it within themselves. Dina describes herself as reclaiming her self and feeling good about the person she is, rather than making a choice that might not be good for her.

Once I left [my husband], it was like batten down the hatches. That's the way I viewed it. So I stayed away from all of it. All of it. I made something good out of a bad situation. OK? And this is very important to me. But I don't actually feel abused

anymore. And I don't feel that I'm going to be that easy to be abused anymore because I really believe that I'm OK. And this was a really big deal for me. Do I feel that I will ever get into another abusive relationship knowingly? The answer is no. The answer is no, because I'm in control. It's amazing what you can do when you feel good about yourself. That's the bottom line.

In summary, women engaged in a number of activities that demonstrated protection of self. Often, women kept journals in which they recorded their feelings. In some cases, the women used their writings to exemplify the importance of the very long journey from abuse. Some used poetry to describe forming boundaries, self-esteem, and protection. The verse below is from a poem Willa wrote to characterize her feelings about her self worth and the boundaries she has erected against abusive treatment:

You're a face, a pair of hands and a hormone  
 And I never should have sailed that damn boat  
 You've gurgled away with the rest of them  
 And I'm not about to skin my knuckles  
 trying to reach you . . .

## DISCUSSION

Although the participants in this study contribute an improved understanding of how and in what ways they coped with abusive experiences, the findings cannot be generalized to all abused women. The extent of differences in the development of inner resources, if any, between women who had left a relationship recently and those who terminated the relationship more than one year ago are not known. In addition, as human behavior cannot be predicted with any certainty, some women might not experience the degree of adaptive coping seen in the findings.

The themes depicted here represent women's voices, expressing their perspectives on coping with abusive relationships and providing valuable depictions of the development and use of inner resources. These important inner resources sanction survival, strength, identity formation and protection. Viewed as survivors rather than victims, the women show remarkable courage. Women with abuse experiences need to have the opportunity to talk about their experiences, as it is through the use of their voices that they are empowered, strengthening their resilience and learning about themselves in the process. Furthermore, women learn to trust and to believe in themselves. As Landenburger (1993) notes, "We may not see any change, but a woman may be beginning to identify her strengths and her situation with clarity" (p. 384).

Survival was a key theme in the women's stories. Using common sense, developing safety nets by hoarding even meager amounts of money, furthering education to obtain more secure employment, and planning escape tactics ultimately played crucial roles in the development of the women's strength. Consequently, these strategies enabled them to leave the abuser eventually.

The ability to develop resilience was significant in that the women used a number of strategies to get through abusive experiences. Hope, spirituality, a sense of humor, and leaning on friends to listen and assist them added to whatever reserves women initially brought with them into relationships that became abusive. In

addition, awareness and use of external resources helped women to obtain legal and physical protection. Networking with other abused women was also used as a coping strategy, descriptive of resilience.

A sense of self-protection helped participants regain and retain their identity as unique women deserving of happier lives. I found it interesting that many of the women described using intuition in identifying red flags of potential abusive partners in subsequent relationships. Many of these women became highly self-protective through careful scrutinizing of behaviors and what they viewed as acceptable or unacceptable in a partner. As one participant emphasized, she had identified a long list of negative behaviors that she was constantly vigilant against in future dating situations. All of these enabled the women to identify themselves as worthy of self-love and self-care. It is important that one woman emphasized safety as love of self, taking precedence over love of someone else in her life, to sustain self-protection.

In the findings, women demonstrated engagement in a continuous process of using self to reach outward to others for help and moving back inward to self-building. This is a dynamic process of healing, transformation, growth, and renewal. It is through this type of dynamic interchange between emotions, placing them in context and making connections, that women progress toward strong self-identity.

Once participants made the first step toward leaving the abusive relationship, they found various types of outside resources to help them reach that goal. Drawing on their inner resources, they tapped into external ones, such as housing, welfare, and legal protection, to name a few. I was interested to note that many women returned to an educational setting. These included one-course offerings, vocational training for specific jobs, and graduate education. Some women provided volunteer services for abused women at community shelters or YWCAs. Of the 17 women, each found a way to make a difference in other abused women's lives, whether directly or indirectly.

Each woman in this study used diverse ways of coping, surviving, and protecting self, personifying, in many cases, courage and survival, which offer a contrast to the stereotype of a dysfunctional, helpless victim. This stereotype includes characteristics such as: the inability to form boundaries, chronically poor judgment in relationship building, poor self-esteem, and impaired sense of self (Farrell, 1996; Landenburger, 1989; Langford, 1998). More specifically, Ulrich states (1998) that "dismissing a woman's survival in an abusive relationship as dependent behavior is not adequate . . . [and] diverts the practitioner's vision from women's coping skills" (p. 77). Unfortunately, as Campbell (1992) observes, health care professionals often view abused women as weak, ineffective individuals and treat them with disdain. To reiterate a point, the women in this study did not view themselves as victims but rather as survivors. Rose's (1990) highly regarded study about women's inner strength notes that perhaps it is a matter of perception; that is, instead of viewing abused women as dysfunctional, those outside their experiences should try to perceive them in terms of successful adaptation. Through the course of many years of abuse, women develop a repertoire of inner resources that helps them cope with some of the most hellish situations a human being can encounter.

These results lead me to question the inferences made in the literature regarding the capacity of abused women to draw on coping strategies, particularly inner resources. Schwartz and Mattley (1993), for example, discuss traditionally viewed feminine traits, such as sensitivity and gentleness, as those that naturally encourage

abusiveness from others. Conceptualizations like these place the onus of responsibility for abuse on women. Victimizing the victim is the result and can only lead to faulty program development and, more seriously, ineffective personal interactions with abused women in health and social service agencies. Rather, inner resources should be maximized by encouraging survivors to reach out into communities to network with others as comfort allows. Furthermore, appreciation of these inner resources might inform future improved program directives that will enhance the care provided for abused women as they seek to reach success and continue on a path toward survival (Fischbach & Herbert, 1997).

Listening to abused women talk about their experiences with abusive partners and exploring with them possible barriers that exist to terminating abusive relationships are some of the most valuable services care-givers can provide (Ulrich, 1993). Although this study represents the voices of 17 participants, it is my plan to collect more women's stories over time. Through multiple voices, stories of women's experiences with domestic violence might cease to be a tentative telling, veiled until the listener's attitude is ascertained.

Much can be learned by listening to what abused women have to say. Using their own words, abused women bring a consciousness to domestic violence that might eventually suspend the epidemic domestic violence has become, of such proportions that it can be only grossly estimated. In one study, women's voices confirmed that almost all abused women initiated the act of breaking off the relationship, effectively terminating the abuse (Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996). Abuser behavior is another area in domestic violence research that could be informed by women's voices. For example, in the study presented through this paper, one participant said she was not typically "drawn" to the type of person who would be considered abusive. Because of this, she initially questioned her decision-making skills about partner selection after she terminated the relationship. Telling her story, she displayed disbelief that she did not recognize him for the abuser he was. However, there are many characteristics of abusers that are simply not known, though they are often similar enough in their behaviors across the board. Until women can acceptably use their voices to tell what they know about abuser behaviors, we will continue to find reasons why abused women are using faulty judgment in choosing partners. Not only does listening provide a vehicle for catharsis, it also validates women's experiences, allowing them to build even stronger inner resources. The collection of women's voices is pivotal for successful research studies related to domestic violence issues.

In summary, through a common, shared understanding, perspectives of abuse experiences are formative of what needs to come next related to the issues of domestic violence in educational curricula, research, and program planning. Indeed, more research is needed to examine how women survive abusive experiences and how the inner resources they use enable them to move on with building successful lives for themselves and their children. In the end, a better knowledge of how abused women have tolerated and survived abuse might result.

## NOTE

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