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To Stay or to Leave: Factors Which Predict Women’s Tolerance of Abusive Relationships

By Lauren Woodward and Melinda Cook, BYU Department of Sociology
Thanks to Dr. Steve Bahr and Dr. Bert Burraston, Faculty mentors

Introduction:
This study focuses on domestic violence victimization, specifically partner abuse towards women. Domestic violence is a major problem in the United States with far reaching consequences. Some estimates have shown that nearly 2 million women in the United States are severely assaulted by their significant others each year.

A major problem that researchers face is, why do these women stay? If they are in an abusive relationship, why would they not end it? There is no definitive answer presented in prior research as to why women choose to leave or to stay in abusive relationships. This study seeks to identify characteristics among abused women that allow women to end abusive relationships, so that initiatives may be taken to provide women with the skills or resources necessary to leave abusive situations when they wish to do so.

Data & Methods:
Data for this study comes from Community Crime Prevention and Intimate Violence in Chicago, 1995-1998.

The dependent variables of interest in our study seek to identify whether or not the abusive relationship has ended, or is still ongoing, and length of the abusive relationship.

Independent variables are broken into categories: variables which we hypothesize will predict the respondent ending the relationship and variables we think may predict the respondent staying in the abusive relationship and tolerating the violence. Control variables in the current study are age and race.

Because of the dichotomous nature of the first dependent variable in this study, models will be created using logistic regression. Results will be interpreted in terms of probabilities or odds of change in the dependent variable depending on the categories of change in the independent variables. The second dependent variable is tested using linear regression models.

Results:
In both the logistic and linear regression models, the variable of most interest is having children with an abusive partner. Student, Homemaker, and Age are significant in various models, but having a child with an abusive partner represents the most negative outcome for women in abusive relationships.

Implications:
The results of this analysis did not predominantly support our hypothesis that certain characteristics possessed by women in violent intimate relationships may allow them to leave more easily than women who do not possess those same characteristics. It seems as though the factors influencing women to stay are more salient than those factors which may provide an avenue to leave abusive relationships.

Further research is necessary on this topic. Although our hypothesis was not supported, the sheer proportion of women in this study who had not left their abusive relationships (23.8%) should be examined further. If nearly one quarter of all women who are abused stay in their abusive relationships for one reason or another, then clearly there is a problem which needs attention. If further research can identify larger patterns among these women’s decisions to stay or leave, maybe a solution can be reached to help.

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