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Literature Review: Analyzing the Reasons for Returning to Abusive Partners

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Abstract

This paper reviews published literature on the myths associated with domestic violence, the internal and external reasons why women return to their abusers, and resources available to women affected by domestic violence. According to negative social stigmas, women stay in abusive relationships because they enjoy the attention, and as such, women deserve their punishments due to their lack of action (Policastro & Payne, 2013). These stigmas can manifest in various forms, including feelings of unworthiness on the part of the abused, less social support, and discouragement from seeking assistance for women who return to abusers (Meyer, 2016). Internal factors include problems with emotional attachment, forgiveness, and childhood sexual abuse. In contrast, external factors are based in economic dependence. Each of these factors increase the difficulty of leaving an abusive partner. A rapid triage assessment tool provides risk factors for returning to a shelter; use of this tool can support intervention to ensure a woman is self-sufficient upon leaving (McFarlane et al., 2016). Using creative activities in counseling, such as the *wheel of wellness* activity, can help women look past their abuser(s) and focus on personal healing. Further research should be conducted about why women return and the effectiveness of current social services available.

Keywords: domestic violence, myths, internal factors, external factors

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Healthy romantic relationships can provide support to individuals; those who communicate effectively with their partners benefit from a sense of closeness (Don & Hammond, 2017). These healthy relationships are attached to an individual's development and well-being (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). However, not all relationships provide positive benefits; romantic relationships are susceptible to miscommunication, anger, doubt, insecurity, and violence. Unhealthy relationships are often classified by irritation, high levels of conflict, and a controlling partner (Galliher et al. 2004). An outcome that may arise out of unhealthy relationships is domestic violence, which negatively impacts those who are abused.

Domestic violence plagues society at an alarming rate: The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) estimated that 4.8 million women in the United States experience physical assault by a romantic partner. Many people are confident that abusive acts, especially physical, are considered domestic violence, yet most are not aware of what the exact legal definitions are (Carlson & Warden, 2005). The United States Department of Justice (2017) legally defines domestic violence as, "a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (para. 1). Domestic violence and intimate partner violence are often used interchangeably, due to the similarity of their definitions. Intimate partner violence encompasses physical, verbal, or sexual acts that harm a partner (Heyman, Slep, & Foran, 2015). This paper will use intimate partner violence and domestic violence interchangeably. Knowing the legal definitions of domestic violence can help bystanders, family members, or federal employees to identify unhealthy relationships and debunk the myth that partner abuse is only physical.

Unfortunately, while domestic violence is seen as an issue in relationships, this does not stop many from finding fault with the victim, rather than an abuser. Other people's negative attitudes towards victims can discourage victims from seeking help from outside sources and force them to deal with the abuse on their own (Yamawaki et. al., 2012). Knowing the potential factors that

influence a woman's decision to return to an abuser is crucial to preventing future returns and revictimization. This paper will review existing literature, focusing primarily on female victims of domestic violence by an intimate partner. The literature addresses the following topics: common myths that surround intimate partner violence, internal and external factors that influence women to stay in abusive relationships, and an analysis of the resources available to these women.

Myths and Stereotypes of Domestic Violence

Women who have experienced domestic violence are often categorized based on the situation and environment of abuse, which categorization may lead to inaccurate assumptions. Existing myths include the ideas that domestic violence is only physical abuse and that a woman can easily leave a relationship but doesn't due to her need for attention (Policastro & Payne, 2013). When a woman fails to leave an abusive relationship, people may begin to hold the woman responsible for her abuse because her choosing to stay is, in a sense, her giving consent to the abuse (Carlson & Worden, 2005). These myths often come from those who do not work closely with victims or those who do not completely understand all factors involved in these cases. However, research has shown that personal perceptions of a victim from professionals, such as law enforcement and social service workers, affect the way victims are assisted (McMullan, Carlan, & Nored, 2010). Professionals who have had previous negative encounters with victims often unfairly assess the situation and provide less resources. The two studies that follow empirically assessed myths regarding victimization and social stigmas.

The first study was conducted to understand how myths affect the public perception of victims and how damaging that can be. Policastro and Payne (2013) surveyed 370 university-level students to analyze their attitudes about victims who return to abusers. This large sample size consisted of 65% women. The study found that a third of the sample group believed women stayed in abusive relationships because they enjoyed the attention of their partner,

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even if that attention was negative. Although a third of the sample is not a majority, this still provides partial support for negative myths correlated with domestic violence. Half of the participants believed that women chose to stay in a relationship and that they did not completely understand why they would, meaning they did not understand the factors that influence victim's decisions. Those who promoted these myths were more likely to agree that women should be criminally charged for exposing children to violence and that a delayed police response to women who reported repeated violence was acceptable (Policastro & Payne, 2013). This suggests that these negative attitudes towards victims could affect the amount of law enforcement intervention, if the employee has these biases.

While this study showed a relationship between those who agreed with the myths of victim blaming and the need for criminal charges against a victim, there are several limitations to these findings. First, the majority of the respondents were women, which may mean there is a slight gender bias. Prior research has examined gender differences in victim blaming, which found that men were more likely to blame victims for their abuse than women (Bryant & Spencer, 2003). Results may have been different if they included more men or more women. Another possible limitation was the sample population used; the mean age was 20.58, with ages ranging from 17 to 48 years old. This could mean that this study does not apply to older populations, which include people in government positions who create policies related to domestic violence. Without knowing the older populations' perception of victims or the actions they would take towards them leaves a gap in research. While this study does have its limitations, it still provides a basic insight into the views people may have and how those views could potentially affect legal actions taken.

The second study, conducted by Meyer (2016), analyzes the social stigmas victims face from the public. This study draws from 28 personal narratives of women who experienced social stigmas related to domestic violence and how it became difficult to overcome the traumatic experience. When a woman does not

fit into the narrative of an innocent, shy victim, then she is seen as the cause of the violence directed toward her. When a victim's actions are seen as morally questionable or risky, such as returning to their abuser, the public often does not see her as deserving of empathy. Sixty-four percent of the women in this study experienced victim-blaming, who reported feelings that they were unworthy of support from those who held these stigmas. While this study applied to directly to law enforcement officials, family and friends also questioned the involvement a victim had with the attack, presuming that they did not uphold household duties, or that they didn't try to make the relationship work and therefore deserved the abuse (Meyer, 2016). This has led to victims feeling the need to redeem themselves from these stigmas by dealing with this trauma themselves.

There are a few limitations within this study such as a low sample size and a specific background for each participant. There were 28 participants, a notably low sample size, which makes it more difficult to generalize to the larger population. This article was also directed towards victims who either return to abusive partners or who have a criminal past, which criminal record negatively impacts public opinion. Using these narratives to assess all victims of domestic violence is problematic because of the specific qualifications needed to participate in this study. The findings from both of these studies draw attention to the negativity victims experience from family, law enforcement, and the general public. Both articles provide an understanding of the struggles victims face when they choose to return to their abusers, and consequently, stop receiving aid from their support systems. These articles showed how certain stigmas negatively impact a victim's self-perception because of how others view them. Women who are subject to many forms of abuse are often vulnerable and may continue to blame themselves for their abuse, especially when others close to them make remarks that hint that it is the woman's fault. Understanding why victims choose to stay with a batterer provides a clearer view of the struggles they face and could soften public views related to victims.

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Women who have experienced domestic violence return to their partners due to many internal and external factors. Internal factors include emotional attachment, forgiveness, and childhood sexual abuse. External factors involve availability of resources that will fend off homelessness. This can include homeless shelters, as well as financial resources. The process of leaving an abuser can be difficult, as a woman is bound to face economic instability, the burden of having to find a safe place to reside, and possibly child custody issues. If women underestimate the complexity of this process, they are more likely to return to their abuser (Griffing et al., 2002). As social service workers, government officials, and law enforcement officers assist in the intervention of domestic violence, they need to understand each factor in order to accurately assess the situation and prevent further revictimization.

Internal Factors

The depth of the emotional connection between a victim and an abuser impacts the woman's decision to return to her abusive partner; terminating this emotional attachment can be a difficult task for most victims. Zoellner et al. (2000), found that those with a heavy emotional attachment to a partner (such as those who loved their partner or believed their partner was capable of change) were more likely to withdraw protection orders. A study conducted by Roberts, Wolfer, and Mele (2008) assessed fifty-five women who were in the process of terminating protection orders against their abuser to identify their primary reasons. Of the participants, 53% of women in the study found that emotional reasons kept them from following through with the process (Roberts et al., 2008). Another study examined 90 women who were current residents at a woman's shelter to understand their reasoning for returning to abusive relationships. The main goal of the researches was to identify levels of emotional attachment and how influential it could be in the decision-making process of victims. Majority of the participants in this study found that emotional attachment to their partner influenced their decision to return to their abuser (Griffing

et al., 2002). Another study by Griffing et al. (2005) found that 70.6% of their participants, who were also victims of childhood sexual abuse, claimed emotional attachment influenced their reason for returning. Anderson et al. (2003) further investigated emotional attachment by surveying 485 women currently located at an advocacy center; it was found that 53.8% of participants returned out of love. It was concluded that women who had a history of returning were more likely to say that emotional attachment was important in their decision-making process (Anderson et al., 2003). Emotional attachment can override a healthy decision-making process, even if abuse occurs repeatedly. Each of these studies were able to examine the role emotional attachment plays when a woman faces the decision of leaving. Identifying the attachment may help social service workers and families assess how to better treat victims and prevent return.

As emotional attachment has been considered a leading factor impacting decision-making for domestic violence victims, one's willingness to forgive has also been linked to a higher rate of return. Individuals are more likely to forgive people they have close relationships with because they want to maintain those relationships (Fincham, 2000). Forgiveness can be closely associated with emotional attachment; if a woman believes that her partner did not mean to intentionally hurt her, then she is more likely to forgive and continue the attachment. One specific study surveyed 121 women in nine different domestic violence shelters to identify the risks forgiveness in violent relationships. It was concluded that the intention to return to an abuser was elevated when a victim held less bitter feelings and was more willing to put the abuse behind them (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Another factor that may influence a victim's willingness to forgive are feelings of obligation. One example includes those whose religions encourage them to forgive. However, little research has been done on forgiveness, including how religion influences victims in domestic violence situations. Investigating forgiveness further should be of interest to those researching victims of domestic violence as it is closely linked with emotional attachment and can provide a clearer picture into emotional attachment.

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The last internal factor to be examined is childhood sexual abuse (CSA), which researchers consider the strongest predictor of revictimization in adolescents and young adults (Casey & Nurius, 2005). While CSA is mostly a physical act, the psychological implications that follow are certainly internal. A history of CSA is linked with a greater chance of experiencing sexual or physical revictimization by 3 or 5 times before the end of high school (Wekerle & Avgoustis, 2003). Barnes, Noll, Putnam, and Trickett (2009) performed a fifteen-year, longitudinal study to examine 93 adolescent and young-adult females who reported later physical and sexual assault after CSA, compared to females who did not experience CSA. It was concluded that women who experienced CSA were almost twice as likely to be revictimized, which is consistent with past research (Barnes et al., 2009). Each of these studies found that there is a pattern with CSA victims and later revictimization.

Traumatic experiences in childhood years can negatively impact individuals later in life. Childhood sexual abuse was examined through a sample of 277 women at outpatient clinics to assess family background and childhood maltreatment experiences. Results suggested that CSA and sexual experiences with peers may be indicators of later victimization for women (Stermac, Reist, Addison, & Millar, 2002). These findings continue to be clear with more research, as Whitfield, Anda, Dube, and Felitti (2003) studied Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), which focused on children witnessing intimate partner violence, and their correlation to intimate partner violence in adulthood. A strong relationship was found between the number of adverse childhood experiences and the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence for women (Whitfield et al., 2003). Each of these studies supports the assertion that CSA affects future revictimization, meaning assessing this upon meeting a victim of domestic violence should be conducted.

External Factors

While internal factors heavily influence the decision of leaving, environmental factors are also important to consider. Economic dependence is critical for some women. Anderson et al. (2003) identified that 45.9% of their participants returned due to their lack

of money while 28.5% also said they had no physical place to go (Anderson et al., 2003). Griffing et al. (2005) compared a group of women who experienced CSA to those who did not; it was found that 32.4% of participants with a history of CSA returned because of economic need while the comparison group had 38.6%. Although this includes a small sample size (34 women with a history of CSA and 70 women participating in the comparison sample), it was one of the higher external factors affecting their decision (Griffing et al., 2005). It was also found that women are willing to tolerate abuse when they lack sufficient economic means if the abuse is neither too severe nor directed at children (Strube, 1988). Being financially dependent on a partner heavily influences a victim's choice to stay or leave an abusive relationship. It is important to identify the financial stability of a woman fleeing a partner, as these studies show this is a main reason for returning.

Recently, there has been a shift in research to focus primarily on internal factors, especially emotional attachment. There have been multiple studies that have examined the external factors that contribute to returning, yet most are dated back to the early 1990s to the 1970s. Most of these studies focused on external factors and identified economic need as a major reason for women staying with their partners. Comparing participants in studies from 30 years ago may not be as applicable to the current population because the social climate has changed. Future research should continue to focus on both internal and external factors, as each impact the decision a woman makes when leaving their abuser. Many factors are considered for women as they try to terminate abusive relationships. The combination of emotional connection, childhood sexual abuse, economic dependence, and forgiveness can make it difficult for a woman to leave an abuser.

Available Assessment Resources

As abuse occurs, there are multiple health issues women face, ranging from immediate injuries (cuts, bruises, knife or gunshot wounds) to long term chronic pain or emotional stress (Campbell, 2002). Domestic violence negatively impacts emotional and mental

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capacities, which include depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This makes it difficult for women to openly and willingly discuss their abuse (Binkley, 2013). The services available to women to help alleviate their trauma include crisis hotlines, shelters and counseling (Bennett, Riger, Schewe, Howard, & Wasco, 2004). Griffing et al. (2002) suggest that although there are services available to victims, a large number of women still return to their partner. The following assessment tools have been briefly studied, but also provide new insights into dealing with trauma experienced by domestic violence and should be studied further.

Social services have provided resources to victims of domestic violence and can help alleviate stress. There was a study that conducted the first statewide evaluation of community-based programs assigned to help women from domestic violence. They studied five service areas and concluded that women gain important information regarding violence, increase their participation in different services, their decision-making is perceived as improved by interacting with these services, and provide a sense of safety (Bennett et al., 2004). Services can provide positive experiences and help those who struggle with leaving a partner. It is important for women to receive social support, as they may turn away from services if they feel judged or are blamed.

While those who come to shelters do receive support, there also needs to be a tool that assesses how effective shelters are and informs women of the challenges they could face when leaving. McFarlane et al. (2016) established a rapid assessment triage tool to use on women who currently reside in shelters which determined their chances of returning to a shelter. The sample consisted of 150 women with children; they were evaluated every four months for a year in order to identify risk factors associated with returning to shelters. There were four risk factors established: danger of murder, age, tangible support, and whether the child witnessed verbal abuse towards the mother. The purpose of the rapid assessment triage tool is to recognize the risk factors and intervene to make sure the woman is ready to be self-sufficient (McFarlane et al., 2016). Refining these tools can help social service workers recognize the

different challenges these women face and find a way to alleviate them. Future testing with this tool will need to be done in order to test its validity and accuracy across a large population. However, establishing and listing different risk factors should be a practice considered by any shelter dedicated to domestic violence victims.

One activity that has been suggested is the wheel of wellness. The wheel of wellness is used to provide an initial assessment of the different areas of life: spiritual, emotional, physical, social, financial, and other categories that are important to the client. The basic concept is to give clients a drawing of a pie and include the categories in their own section. The clients then color in each pie slice to represent how “full” they are in each area. Meyers and Sweeney (2005), the creators of this assessment, focus on the client’s perspective of themselves and what areas they feel low in. This allows for the counselor to narrow which areas they can focus on in therapy; the purpose is not to completely fill every area, but rather keep a healthy balance of all (Binkley, 2013). Using each of these is a start to helping women cope and heal from the abuse experienced. Discussing the trauma immediately may overwhelm the client, but using this wheel provides a basic picture of which areas of life were most affected by the abuse to allow for more effective counseling and resources. Although this was mainly two studies, implementing this would help the client as well as a therapist in sessions.

This activity focuses on a safe and positive way to confront traumatic experiences and how to recover from it. Allowing these women to look past their abuser helps them clear their minds and focus on how to heal themselves. While each of these activities are helpful, there were no statistical analyses of these being used in therapy that supported the outcomes suggested. Future research should be conducted to see how these abstract, creative activities impact clients who have traumatic experiences related to domestic violence. Overall, while attitudes from family and professionals affect whether a woman reaches out for support, continuing to improve the available resources should of interest to those specifically in social service positions. Expanding the scope of

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research should be an important task; learning how educating the public on domestic violence affects their perceptions could provide more social support for these victims and improve the therapeutic options available to them.

Conclusion

This review examined the myths enshrouding a women's experience of domestic violence, the internal and external factors that contribute to a woman returning to an abusive partner, and the possible tools to improve available resources. Women who suffer abuse from intimate partners are susceptible to strong negative feelings and economic difficulties upon leaving or seeking help. Emotional attachment is often a leading cause for returning to an abuser, with economic dependence being close behind. Understanding these reasons will allow for a more accurate assessment of the situation and may limit the number of negative stigmas people hold towards women who return to an abusive situation. When social service workers, family members, and law enforcement officials hold these attitudes, the victim turns inward and often deals with the trauma themselves. To limit this, social resources available should be improved and studied further to provide a clearer view into how to better help women who experience domestic violence.

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