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Mothers' Decisions to Leave Abusive Intimate Partners: A Qualitative Meta-Summary

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Mothers' Decisions to Leave Abusive Intimate Partners:

A Qualitative Meta-Summary

Honors Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements of HON 420
Fall 2014

By
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Mothers' Decisions to Leave Abusive Intimate Partners:

A Qualitative Meta-Summary

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The objectives of this meta-summary are to (1) explore the factors that contribute to mothers' decisions to leave intimate partner violence (IPV), (2) find similarities and differences in these factors among mothers, and (3) discuss implications of these findings for advocates and researchers. Six qualitative studies concerning the views of adult, firsthand IPV victims in the United States, Norway, and Nicaragua are utilized. Using Sandelowski and Barroso's meta-summary method, findings related to women's decisions to leave a violent relationship were extracted from the articles. Fifty-four initial findings were reduced to fifteen abstracted findings, and four major themes were identified: picturing a better future, stagnant or worsening situation, children's best interests, and outside intervention. The effect sizes of each abstracted finding and theme were calculated. The most pervasive findings, at 83% each, noted that a mother left because she realized her child had been or could be hurt by the abusive intimate partner or because the violence significantly worsened. All of the studies addressed the themes 'stagnant or worsening situation" and "children's best interests;" 67% and 83% of the studies addressed "picturing a better future" and "outside intervention," respectively. The study shows that while women's individual situations may vary greatly, similarities exist between their decisions to leave. The study is limited by its use of completed studies rather than primary data, but nevertheless offers insight into factors that affect mothers' decisions to leave abusive relationships. Implications and recommendations for additional research are discussed.

Keywords and phrases: honors thesis, meta-summary, qualitative data, intimate partner violence, leaving, women, mothers, children

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health problem in the United States. As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2013), IPV refers to "physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse" (para. 1). Aside from a current or former spouse, an intimate partner could be any dating partner regardless of sexual orientation, cohabitation, or sexual relations (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002). While IPV is often stigmatized as "wife battering," the issue of IPV goes deeper than the physical harm inflicted from one individual to another. IPV encompasses not only physical abuse but also transgressions including sexual assault, threats of death or serious injury, isolation of the victim from outsiders, the withholding of money or basic necessities, and stalking. The psychological tactics that perpetrators use to control and manipulate their victims can be especially challenging aspects of IPV, in some cases causing psychological and emotional harm equal to or more devastating than physical injury.

Intimate partner violence has affected millions of women in the United States. Findings from the landmark National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) showed that in a single year in the United States, 1.5 million women experienced IPV (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). From a proportional standpoint, U.S. Department of Justice found that 3.6

of every 1,000 Americans experience IPV each year (Catalano, 2012). These women collectively experienced 4.8 million victimizations in a single year, which comes to an astonishing average of one victimization every seven seconds (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In fact, the NVAWS also showed that one in four women in the United States had been raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in life (Tjaden & Thoennes 2000). The fact that twenty-five percent of American women have experienced a form of IPV illustrates the prevalence of IPV through the nation. Furthermore, the CDC (2013) found that in the United States, there were over 1,200 homicides by intimate partners each year, meaning that approximately one in every 1,250 women who experienced IPV was killed by her abuser. In fact, statistics show that two of every five female homicide victims in the United States were killed by an intimate partner (Cooper & Smith, 2011). When intimate partners commit forty percent of all homicides against women, the evidence is clear that IPV has a significant, deadly toll in the United States. IPV is a serious problem that requires immediate attention; the implications of IPV are not limited to innocuous batterings, but in fact expand to include fatal altercations.

A wide array of characteristics affects a woman's experience of IPV. One significant factor in a woman's experience is the presence of children in the home. Considering that close to forty percent of women who experience IPV have children under the age of eighteen living with them, motherhood plays into many victims' experiences (Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, & Barg 2010). Mothers face an especially complex web of issues when deciding whether to say with or leave an abuser because they must consider the effects of their decisions on their children as well as the ramifications for themselves. Both staying in and taking leave from an abusive relationship could have considerable impacts on the

children living in the home. Remaining in the relationship could provide a level of stability for the children but could also cause safety concerns for the mother. Leaving the relationship could protect children from witnessing violence in the home but could jeopardize financial stability. With the added responsibility of caring for children and the psychological burden of weighing challenges against advantages of leaving, mothers preparing to leave abusive relationships must engage in greater amounts of planning and preparation than women without children must.

Mothers who experience IPV have unique experiences that are strung together by similar threads that occur through their personal narratives. The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors associated with mothers' decisions to leave abusive relationships. Specifically, it aims to provide an in-depth look at the factors that influence mothers' final decisions to leave, using a systematic meta-summary that compares the findings of six qualitative studies.

Statement of Purpose

There are three primary goals of this research. First, this research aims to synthesize academic literature about factors contributing to mothers' decisions to leave relationships characterized by IPV. Contemporary literature provides a wealth of qualitative data about women's experiences of leaving IPV. However, few comparative analyses of findings exist. Synthesizing findings would provide future researchers with a comprehensive overview that is not currently available.

Next, the research seeks to refine the current understanding of decision-making processes of women in violent relationships, specifically related to mothers' decisions to leave the relationships. The choice to leave a violent relationship is a critical event because it

marks a turning point. As Goodman and Dutton (2007) found, the health and wellbeing of women increased after the women left their abusive partners, so making the decision to leave signifies the start of a journey towards increased overall health. Specifically examining the decision-making of mothers allows for an in-depth look at the range of factors that may not affect other populations of women. As a whole, developing a better understanding of the factors that most significantly influence mothers to make the final decision to leave helps inform advocates and interventionists about the issues that are most important to these women as they make their choice.

Finally, the research seeks to draw conclusions about the correlation between a woman's identity as a mother and the factors that most strongly influence her decision to leave a relationship characterized by IPV. Armed with information specifically relevant to mothers, interventionists may be able to guide mothers toward the decision to leave a violent relationship, improving women's safety and wellbeing and shaping intervention efforts around the findings specifically related to mothers.

To address these purposes, three questions guide this research:

1. What factors contribute to mothers' decisions to leave abusive intimate partners?

2. What are the similarities and differences in these factors among mothers?

3. What are the implications of these findings for advocates and researchers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is a phenomenon that pervades the lives of millions of women. In the United States alone, IPV affects 1.5 million women annually and twenty-five percent of all American women at some point in their lives. Clearly IPV is prevalent, but it is also a pressing issue. Instances of IPV are not isolated occurrences but events within larger schemes of controlling behaviors that cause significant physical, psychological, and emotional harm to women.

Examining the financial impact of IPV on the health care system is one way to measure the wide scope of its impact. The CDC (2013) estimated that in a single year in the United States, an excess of $4.1 billion was spent on health care costs directly related to IPV, including physical care and psychological treatment of victims. Some of the health concerns for victims include acute ramifications of physical violence such as broken or fractured bones, internal hemorrhaging, traumatic brain injury, or death (CDC, 2013). Additionally, because abusive partners may socially isolate their victims, stalk them, and engage in verbal and sexual abuse, corporeal manifestations of trauma are not the only effects for victims. The psychological components of IPV can contribute to chronic mental illnesses including post-traumatic stress disorder, clinical depression, and anxiety disorders (Lacey, McPherson, Samuel, Sears, & Head, 2013). An additional consequence can be loss of work. Victims of IPV may be forced to take time off work by a controlling partner, a severe injury, or for personal protection, as harassment and stalking at a victim's workplace leads some women to take extended absences from their jobs. Combining the cost of health care with the loss of productivity brings the fiscal impact of IPV to an excess of $5.8 billion annually (Lacey,

Saunder, & Zhang, 2011). The effects of IPV seep into every area of a victim's life and cost the nation billions of dollars, making IPV a pressing women's health issue.

Motherhood and IPV

Mothers make up a large percentage of all IPV victims in the United States. As Rhodes and colleagues (2010) noted, forty percent of IPV victims are mothers with children under the age of eighteen residing in the home. Researchers have increasingly examined the relationship between motherhood and intimate partner violence, and statistics show that some correlation exists between the presence of children in a household and the rate of IPV. For example, a study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that single women in households with children experienced IPV at a significantly higher rate than women in any other household composition. Single women with children experienced 31.7 victimizations per 1,000 females ages 12 or older, which was nearly seven times greater than the rate of 4.6 per 1,000 for households with only one female adult (Catalano, 2012). IPV is so closely linked to the experience of having children that some pediatric health care providers use children's doctor visits as opportunities to screen for and intervene in IPV (Randell, Bledsoe, Shroff, & Pierce, 2012).

The effect of motherhood on a woman's decision to leave is complex and varied. Baly (2010) notes that internal discourses related to a woman's protective role as a mother may be significant factors in her decisions; in the study by Randell and colleagues (2012), the researchers found that children were one of the most important factors in a mother's decision to leave. While a woman may be more likely to leave in order to protect her children, she may also be more likely to stay with her abuser in order to provide her children with financial security or family structure stability (Randell, et al., 2012; Kelly, 2009; Zink, Elder, &

Jacobson, 2003). Concerns about stigmatization and safety distinctively affect mothers, as do concerns about whether the children's father would fight for custody or the possibility of Child Protective Services removing children from the home. A woman's decision to leave is complicated when she must consider whether her abusive partner would gain custody over the children, debate whether her child would face social ramifications as a result of living in a single-parent home, or challenge her abuser's threats against the lives of herself and her children (Kelly, 2009; Semaan, Jasinski, & Bubriski-McKenzie, 2013). While motherhood cannot be labeled a causal factor for IPV, the correlation between motherhood and IPV merits investigation, especially considering the myriad of ways that being a mother is closely tied to a woman's experience of IPV.

Leaving an Abusive Intimate Partner

Leaving an abusive relationship is not a simple process. Financial struggles, emotional attachment to the abuser, and lack of social support are all factors that complicate a woman's decision to leave an abusive partner permanently. Enander (2011) explores the emotional work behind the decision by comparing an abusive partner to the literary figures Jekyll and Hyde: "Informants described confusion, inability to reconcile the differences and self-blame as a consequence of the introduction of Hyde alongside the good Jekyll" (p. 36). Women may doubt the abuse or focus on the positive aspects of her intimate partner's actions more than the negative ones. Additionally, societal attitudes of victim blaming influence the actions and self-perceptions of IPV victims. As Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Harlos, and Swindler (2012) explained, outsiders' overly simplified conceptualizations of abusive relationships foster myths about IPV that can cause a victim to believe that the abuse is her own fault or that she deserves the abuse.

Further complicating the investigation of women's decision-making processes related to leaving is the fact that women often leave and return to their abusers five to seven times before finally committing to an indefinite separation (Lacey et al., 2011; Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007). As Goodman and Dutton (2007) noted, one-third of women who entered shelters immediately returned to their partners upon leaving the shelter, and 60% of women returned to their partners within two months of leaving the shelter. The decision to leave often occurs on more than one occasion and with varying degrees of commitment to the decision to stay away.

Over the past decades, researchers have increasingly studied why women finally commit to leaving. Lee and Bell-Scott (2009) found that women often made the decision to leave after a particularly violent episode of abuse, a finding also reflected in studies by Rhodes and colleagues (2010) and Enander (2011). Additional studies consider such external factors as the severity of the abuse, the wellbeing of family members, and the financial viability of living apart from the abusive partner (Baly, 2010; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). The factors related to a woman's identity as a mother and the presence of children in the home are two areas this research specifically aims to examine.

Qualitative Data and IPV

Qualitative data is particularly important in understanding the lived experiences of IPV victims. The flexibility of qualitative inquiry allows themes to develop, which is especially important for topics as complex and varied as the process of leaving an abusive relationship. Qualitative research provides a medium for individuals' personally constructed experiences to be explored, in turn providing researchers with real interpretations of situations rather than artificially constructed ones. For mothers, qualitative methods such as

in-person interviews can be more reliable than written or telephoned surveys. Because IPV victims may be under surveillance by their abusers, interviews can be safer and more reliable means of collecting information about violence because the victim will be less likely to misconstrue information to appease the violent intimate partner. So, the use of qualitative methods of study like interviews and focus groups both provide a safe atmosphere for women to share information as well as an opportunity for the researcher to establish a level of trust with the informant that would help the informant feel more comfortable sharing honest, personal information about a sensitive topic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is structured as a qualitative meta-summary, which serves a variety of purposes. First, this allows the researcher to examine the lived experiences of victims of IPV without the extensive training required to interview vulnerable populations about distressing experiences. More importantly, utilizing qualitative data that has already been collected protects women from recounting their experiences more than is necessary. Finally, the creation of a meta-summary contributes to the body of literature on a topic by providing a summation of the findings from a variety of studies in a single location.

Developed to address the recent increases in the amount of qualitative data in academic journals, the model of a systematic meta-summary by Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) outlines a systematic method of combining data into a cohesive whole. Their methods are similar to quantitative analyses because of the use of effect sizes to gauge the prevalence of particular themes across the included studies. Another interesting quality of qualitative meta-summaries is that they allow for the accumulation of information from studies that use differing methods and research paradigms. This quality makes qualitative meta-summaries particularly helpful in providing overviews of information on particular topics because they include information from studies that may otherwise have been excluded based on the researcher's methodological standpoint. So, this approach decreases the "error of exclusion," a bias produced by excluding studies from a certain ideological paradigm based on procedural and interpretive differences (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, p. 228).

There is a four-step process in creating a qualitative meta-summary. First, the researcher identifies studies to include. Second, findings are extracted from each study.

Third, extracted findings are reduced into abstracted findings. Finally, effect sizes are calculated. The use of a systematic approach in selecting studies, extracting findings, and calculating effect sizes adds to the strength of the methodology, while combining the findings of multiple sources offers a breadth of information that would be costly and time-consuming to gather in a single study.

Data Collection

In a systematic meta-summary, the data consists of the findings from all included studies. Findings refer to the conclusions that are thematic to an entire report, and findings are the conclusions drawn by a researcher that are separate from (1) quotations used to support conclusions, (2) analysis of the information by the researcher, and (3) information drawn from previous studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003).

Before findings could be identified, the researcher identified articles to include. To identify articles, a systematic search of databases available through Eastern Kentucky University's Library database system was conducted. Initially, trial searches were conducted to explore possible search terms and strategies. Additionally, a search was conducted to find the most relevant databases to use, narrowing the included databases from seventy-two to the eight that included the most relevant information. The following databases were chosen: Academic Search Complete; Academic Search Premier; PsychINFO; SocINDEX with Full Text; MEDLINE; Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text; CINAHL Complete; Violence and Abuse Abstracts. The universe of databases was limited from seventy-two to eight in order to allow for precise, strategic searching. From there, broad searches were conducted within the chosen databases to find relevant articles that would meet the basic criteria. Initially, the terms "intimate partner violence" and "mother" were used; when these terms

resulted in few relevant studies, more specific terms were incorporated. Utilizing the terms "leav*", "help-seeking", "qualitative", and "interview" produced 84 relevant results.

After screening the articles to include only scholarly, peer-reviewed articles from academic journals that were in the English language, 75 articles remained (see Figure 1 for flowchart illustrating search process). These articles were further reviewed for eligibility according to the following criteria:

1. Identified factors contributing to women's decisions to leave intimate partner violence through first-hand accounts of victims, not the perspectives of perpetrators or others who did not directly experience IPV
2. Included only the perspectives of adult women (18 years of age or older) who were mothers
3. Utilized qualitative methodology

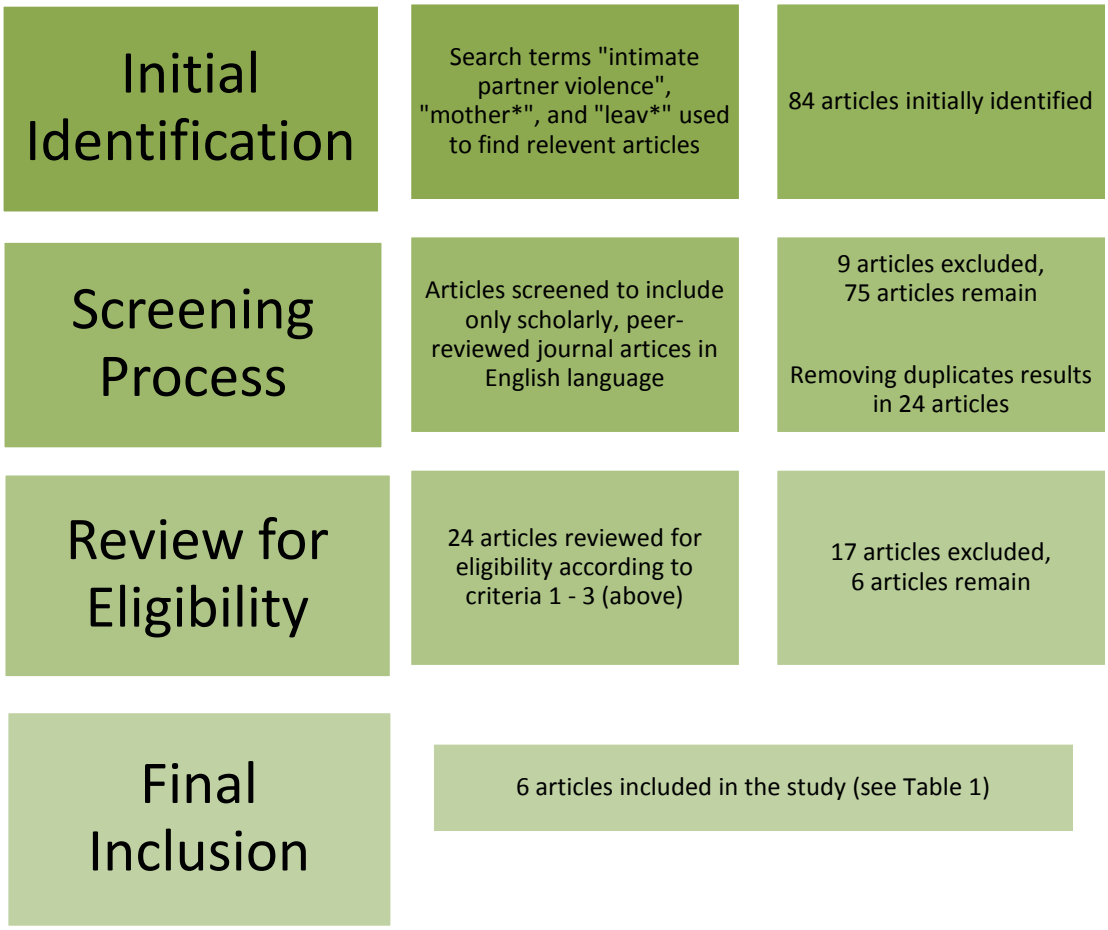
Following the screening and eligibility review, six articles that met the inclusion criteria remained (see Table 1 for included studies).

Next, the primary data collection occurred: findings were extracted from the included studies. In accordance with Sandelowski and Barroso's (2003) methodological outline, findings were extricated from articles by carefully reading the findings sections for conclusions that represented thematic findings for the article as a whole. Each phrase that was identified was slightly modified to create a complete sentence that would be understandable outside of its original context. From the six studies that were included, the researcher extracted fifty-four findings total.

Table 1 Qualitative studies included in meta-summary

Authors	Date & Country	Methods, Design, Data Collection	Type of Abuse	Sample: (Ages, Race, Recruitment)
Engnes, Liden, & Lundgren	2013 Norway	In-depth interviews, Phenomenology	IPV	7 Norwegian mothers (ages 20 – 38 years) Recruited from treatment center
Kelly	2009 USA	Interviews and focus groups	IPV	17 Latina mothers (19 – 53 years) Recruited from domestic violence and legal service agencies
Randell, Bledsoe, Shroff, & Pierce	2012 USA	Focus groups in English or Spanish Grounded theory	IPV	62 mothers (21 – 49 years) 26 White, 16 African American, 13 Hispanic, 3 Other, 4 Not reported Purposive sample from urban IPV shelter
Salazar, Hogberg, Valladares, & Ohman	2012 Nicaragua	Semi-structured interviews Grounded theory	IPV	13 Nicaraguan mothers (19 – 43 years) Recruited from previous study
Semaan, Jasinski, Bubriski-McKenzie	2013 USA	In-depth interviews	IPV	19 mothers (ages not given) 10 White, 5 Latina, 3 African American, 1 Native American Recruited from fliers
Zink, Elder, & Jacobson	2003 USA	Interviews	IPV	32 mothers (18 – 45 years) in IPV support groups 16 White, 16 African American or other

Figure 1 Flowchart of studies from search to inclusion



Analysis

To analyze the data, findings were abstracted and overarching themes were identified. Specifically, once the list of fifty-four findings had been complied, the statements were reduced into abstracted findings by organizing them into similar groups, removing duplicates, and combining very similar findings into a single summation of their points. As a result, seventeen abstracted findings were produced. Finally, the abstracted findings were grouped together based on their themes, and five overarching themes were drawn from the data (see Table 2 for themes and abstracted findings). The use of abstraction techniques

made the data more accessible by eliminating repetition and creating the concise summations.

Additionally, effect sizes were calculated to further aid in the interpretation of data. As Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) explain, the use of effect sizes in qualitative meta-summaries helps readers and researchers assign the appropriate significance to each finding. The effect sizes utilized in this study show the magnitude of the finding. Effect sizes were calculated by dividing the number of studies in which a finding appeared by the total number of reports in the study (six). In other words, the magnitude of the finding demonstrates the percentage of included studies that illustrate it. Effect sizes were also calculated for each theme. Thematic effect sizes demonstrate the saturation of a theme throughout the included studies, showing the percentage of studies that included at least one finding that supports the theme.

Table 2 Abstracted findings and major themes

Theme & Effect Size	Concepts from Original Articles	Effect Size
Picturing a Better Future: 67%	1. Mothers felt like "enough was enough," and wanted a better life.	17%
	2. Mothers wanted to do a better job of caring for their children and felt like they could only do so by leaving.	33%
	3. Mothers reached financial security by obtaining jobs, finding resources, and/or saving enough money.	17%
Stagnant or Worsening Situation: 100%	4. A particularly severe episode of abuse including actual or threatened severe harm to mother or children occurred.	83%
	5. Mothers realized and accepted that their abusive intimate partners would not change.	33%
	6. Mothers realized the intimate relationship was not normal or healthy.	67%
	7. The abusive partner began involving children in controlling or manipulative tactics.	17%
Children's Best Interests: 100%	8. Mother realized that the child had been hurt or could be hurt by the abusive intimate partner in the future.	83%
	9. Mothers did not want children to believe it was acceptable to treat or be treated with violence by an intimate partner.	50%
	10. Mothers realized that their children knew and understood aspects of the violence when the child commented on and/or mimicked the abuse.	17%
	11. Women realized that Child Protective Services could become involved and feared potential loss of child custody.	17%
Outside Intervention: 83%	12. Family, friends, institutions, and organizations helped mothers recognize violence and obtain support.	67%
	13. Healthcare personnel, legal professionals, family, friends, and teachers intervened by saying "the right thing at the right time."	33%
	14. Mothers learned accurate and reassuring information about disclosing violence to an outside source.	17%
	15. Mothers entered substance abuse treatment, were arrested, or were mandated support group or shelter attendance.	33%

RESULTS

Sample

Six articles were included in the study. The sample sizes ranged from 7 to 62 with a combined sample size of 150 women. Women in the studies ranged from 18 to 53 years of age and identified ethnicities included Caucasian, African American, Latina, Norwegian, and Native American. Four of the studies were conducted in the United States, one was in Norway, and one was in Nicaragua. All of the included articles used interviews and/or focus groups to obtain qualitative data directly from mothers who experienced IPV firsthand.

Effect sizes of individual abstracted findings ranged from 17% to 83% (see Table 2). The abstracted findings with the highest effect sizes were a particularly severe episode of violence occurring or the mother realizing that her children had been or could be hurt by her abusive intimate partner. Those with the lowest effect sizes were mothers obtaining financial security, the abusive partner involving children in his or her manipulative tactics, mothers realizing that children knew and understood aspects of the violence, and mothers learning information about formal help-seeking. Thematic effect sizes ranged from 67% to 100%. Every study addressed the themes of a stagnant or worsening situation and acting in the children's best interests, while 83% addressed obtaining outside intervention and 67% addressed picturing a better future.

Picturing a Better Future

In two-thirds of the included studies, women chose to leave their abusive relationships because they desired a change. For example, mothers felt like "enough was enough," or stated that they wanted to be better mothers. In Randell et al. (2012), one mother stated that she was "sick and tired of being sick and tired" (p. 57). Her statement captured

the feelings of the mothers who similarly felt they had experienced enough violence and were ready to make a significant lifestyle change. Multiple mothers also made the decision to gradually work towards obtaining a better life through financial security. Often, abusive intimate partners controlled their partners' finances, at times preventing their victims from working or having access to their paychecks. While obtaining some level of financial security would be necessary for an individual to obtain shelter and food, money was an even more important factor for mothers who planned to remove their children from the home. Having children significantly increased the amount of financial preparation necessary for a victim to leave the abusive partner, and the steps women took to save money demonstrated the belief in a better future for themselves and their children.

Making the decision to leave an abusive partner was difficult for the mothers, and the findings under this theme demonstrate the power of optimism in the women's situations. Enander (2011) discussed the conflicting emotions women felt towards volatile partners who were kind in one moment and violent in another. When the women in these studies chose to focus their hopes on a brighter future for themselves and their children instead of on the idea that a partner could change his or her behavior, the women were able to gather the emotional strength necessary to make the final break.

Stagnant or Worsening Situation

For all of the women, the decision to leave an abusive relationship was precipitated in some way by stagnation or worsening of her situation. Stagnation of a situation was illustrated by a victim realizing that her abusive partner would not change. In these cases, women made an important discovery through their discontent with the status quo. In a majority of cases, the decision to leave was caused not by stagnation, but instead by

intensification. Almost universal was a particularly severe episode of violence that brought to the victim's attention the immediate danger of the situation. In some instances, this was accompanied by a change in the intimate partner's tactics: he/she began involving children in his/her manipulation, began stalking the victim when she left the house, or used especially threatening language. In other cases, a trip to the hospital as a result of the violent episode was the culminating factor. The worsening violence helped mothers realize that their relationships were not normal or healthy.

Whether it was through change or a lack of change, mothers eventually came to grips with the gravity of their situations. For many of the women, as long as the violence was tolerable, the relationship was worth maintaining. However, certain physical and verbal attacks caused women to rethink the way they conceptualized their relationships. Perhaps because the ramifications were physically evident, more mothers' decisions were affected by a violent incident than by internal motivation to improve the situation.

Children's Best Interests

The second of two themes that were found in all of the studies was this: a mother's decision to leave was motivated by the desire to act in her children's best interests. The findings supporting this theme address a range of issues related to the relationships between mothers and their children. Foremost for the mothers was the desire to protect their children from physical and psychological harm. For many mothers, it was not the moment that they were most severely hurt but instead the moment their children were even slightly hurt that they decided the situation was intolerable. This theme showed up across all of the studies: mothers consistently placed the safety and wellbeing of their children over that of themselves. Closely tied to the physical protection of her children was the realization that

Child Protective Services could intervene on behalf of the children. When women felt like their custody over the children was endangered, they made efforts to completely leave the abusive relationship.

While physical safety of children was a strong indicator of a mother's decision to leave, psychological wellbeing also played a large role in the final resolution. Mothers did not want their children to believe that IPV was an acceptable manner to treat or be treated by others, and at the first indication that her children had adapted this perception, many mothers left the relationship. For some mothers, this occurred with a particular event; her child may have mimicked the behavior of the abuser by hitting the mother or verbally abusing her. In other situations, the child commenting on the abuse was enough to make a mother realize that the abuse had psychologically affected her child. In both instances, the realization that her children knew about and understood aspects of the violence was too much to bear.

While every study addressed the impact of children on a mother's decision to leave, her decision related to her children was often closely linked to a realization from another category. For example, a mother could choose to leave because she realized her child could be hurt in the future, but this realization could have been coupled with a particularly severe attack by the intimate partner. Similarly, a mother witnessing her child mimicking the abuse could have been the result of her abusive partner involving the children in manipulative tactics. While issues related to children were significant and prevalent, it is important to conceptualize them as part of a greater, more complex web of issues than as isolated incidents.

Outside Intervention

The final category encompassed outside intervention. A variety of people offered

support and guidance to victimized mothers, including family, friends, local organizations, healthcare personnel, and legal professionals. While most women appeared to obtain help from family and friends, it is important to note that a portion of women did receive help from unrelated personnel. Because all of the women in this study were mothers, they came into contact with individuals that single or childless women may not normally encounter. Mothers' interactions with their children's teachers and pediatricians had significant impacts on their thoughts and feelings about the violence. Interactions with others helped women realize that violence was occurring and that help was available. Especially when a mother had few financial resources, the support of local organizations encouraged her to take the necessary steps to obtain help.

In certain instances, intervention by others occurred through more negative means. In some instances, the event that caused a woman to leave her abusive partner was her physical removal from the situation through an arrest, admittance to a substance abuse treatment center, or court-mandated support group or shelter attendance. These cases were unique because women did not leave of their own accord but instead through mandated intervention by professionals in the community including police officers or healthcare practitioners.

Specific to immigrant women was the significance of learning accurate and reassuring information about disclosing IPV to an outsider. Women who had immigrated to the United States feared deportation as a result of disclosure of the IPV to any officials, a finding reflected in multiple studies on immigrant women experiencing IPV (Lee & Bell-Scott, 2009; Bui, 2014). Learning about protective and assistive services, especially available in the woman's native language, was a life-altering event for these women, showcasing the importance of accessible information in a variety of linguistic formats.

Whether it was through her own volition or not, intervention by others put mothers in a situation where they could more easily leave their violent relationships. The findings in this category illustrate the importance of social connections to victims of IPV. IPV victims are often socially isolated. They may feel alone because of prohibitive actions by their abusive partners or because of stigmas associated with being a victim of IPV. When individuals external to the situation intervened on behalf of the victim, they often helped mothers realize the reality of the abusive situation and methods to leave it. Again, these findings cannot be taken in isolation. Often, a woman's interaction with another individual was the result of an extraneous factor. A woman may have experienced an interaction with a healthcare professional as a result of a severe incident of violence or she may have interacted with her child's teacher and realized that her child was affected by the violence in the household.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Results

Developing an understanding of the reasons behind a woman's decision to leave an abusive intimate partner is crucial. With this in mind, the goals of this study were to identify factors that contribute to mothers' decisions to leave abusive intimate partners and to explore the similarities and differences among these factors. In line with this, the researcher found four themes relating to mothers' decisions to leave, including picturing a better future, stagnant or worsening situation, children's best interests, and outside intervention. Looking into the similarities and differences between the ways these factors played into women's decisions could aid advocates' abilities to help mothers experiencing IPV make the decision to leave.

The four thematic findings were not only significant in and of themselves; one of the most important conclusions that can be drawn from this study is that all of the reasons given for leaving an abusive relationship were deeply interconnected. For example, a severely violent incident that precipitated a woman's decision to leave may have brought her into contact with outside intervention that further solidified her decision. In this case, neither the violence nor the outside intervention could be considered individually because one was the result of the other, and it was only through their combination that the woman came to her conclusion. Similarly, the perceptual change indicated by working towards a brighter future could have been caused by the realization that a woman's child was affected by the violence, which in turn could have been caused by an interaction with an adult who knew the child.

When considering each theme within a larger context, the common threads among the reasons for leaving become more evident. When categorizing findings, the researcher

found that many of the reasons women cited for leaving overlapped or were caused directly or inadvertently by one another. While each finding has its own significance, a more valuable picture of why a woman may choose to leave is given when one considers the information as a unified whole.

Limitations

In this study, the researcher synthesized findings from six reports in an effort to find similarities and differences between the experiences of mothers when choosing to leave abusive relationships. A limitation of this method of study is that is used data that had already been interpreted rather than the first-hand accounts of the women themselves. By using completed studies, the researcher relied entirely on the account of the studies' authors to provide accurate, complete representations of the information obtained in focus groups and interviews. As a result, subtle similarities between women's accounts could have been lost. Additionally, this prohibited a more in-depth analysis of the reasons individual women gave for leaving their relationships as a result of individual circumstances.

Additionally, this research only addresses women in heterosexual relationships and not lesbian or bisexual mothers in homosexual relationships, which limited the scope of the study. There was a clear gap in the literature related to this topic, making this a limitation not only for this study but also for the entire body of academic literature addressing IPV.

Implications

As this study shows, a variety of interconnected factors influence women's decisions to leave abusive relationships. While every victim's situation and decision-making strategy is unique, similarities do exist between victims who share certain characteristics. Possessing an understanding of the issues that affect victims is a valuable way for advocates to intervene

in situations where IPV occurs. Law enforcement officers, health care providers, and domestic violence center staff all play roles in educating communities and individuals about what IPV is and how to obtain help with handling an abusive relationship.

A crucial aspect of offering assistance is having an understanding of when, why, and from whom women would seek that assistance. All of the findings from this study could help advocates decide how to distribute information to women who could need it and the individuals who could provide that information. First, this research found that women may leave or seek help when they reach a point of wanting a better future. Because obtaining a job or financial security often plays a large role in this case, banks or employment agencies could be appropriate areas for disseminating information about IPV. Secondly, many women choose to leave when violence escalates, so providing sensitivity training to health care providers and offering information about IPV in health care centers could be valuable ways of providing education about and access to available resources. Finally, considering the significance of children and outside intervention (which often occurs through individuals that interact with the children) means that pediatricians, teachers, and others who come in contact with children could be important to offering support to IPV victims. Educating these groups about IPV myths and stereotypes could better prepare them to offer support rather than judgment to a victim.

Also of note is the fact that Latina women faced unique challenges to obtaining information about escaping abusive intimate partners. Difficulty accessing and translating information from English to Spanish were significant barriers to their help-seeking efforts. This research found that attaining information that the women could understand was one of the most significant interventions for women who lived in America but did not speak

English. Making information more accessible by providing it in a variety of languages, both in print and online, is another way advocates can help women obtain assistance.

Recommendations

When conducting the research, little information about lesbian, bisexual, or transgender women experiencing IPV was available. In fact, the researcher found only one exploratory study that addressed lesbian mothers' decisions to leave IPV. More research should be done to consider not only the barriers and facilitators to lesbian mothers' leaving, but also their experiences of IPV as a whole. The dearth of information about the amount, type, and severity of IPV that these women experience should be addressed.

Additionally, providing more education about IPV myths, experiences, and available resources to the groups who could come into contact with victims would be beneficial. Law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, and educators are groups of individuals who could be especially useful in disseminating information to the women who need it. Using this type of a community-based approach to combat IPV could significantly increase women's access to information and their willingness to reach out for help.

CONCLUSION

A variety of factors affect women's decisions to leave IPV, and being a mother can significantly affect the reasons a woman chooses to leave the relationship. Not only does being a mother add to the amount of preparation a woman may need to make before leaving, but it also provides avenues for outside intervention that women without children may not have. For example, a mother may interact with her child's teachers and pediatricians while a woman without children would not have these interactions. Considering both sides, being a mother can both facilitate and hinder the leaving process. Additionally, this research challenges the assumption that women leave only out of concern for their children; it offers a more intimate look at the complex, interrelated factors that lead to a mother's final decision. The findings of this research shed light onto additional community areas that could be used for reaching out to women who are ready to leave their abusers and noted the fact that enough attention has not been given to the population of mothers who are in homosexual relationships. Finally, this study supports the fact that continued investigation of women's help-seeking behaviors could have significant effects for advocates, researchers, and most importantly, victims of intimate partner violence.

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