

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN CONFLICT  
MANAGEMENT STYLE ON PARTICIPATION IN A  
VIOLENT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

By

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Many studies, such as Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000; and Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986 focus on the intergenerational transmission of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, most literature regarding the intergenerational transmission of intimate partner violence is based on a social learning perspective, which states that if children witness violence in their families of origin, they will be more likely to experience violence in their future intimate relationships (Bergen, Edelson, & Renzetti, 2005; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). While some authors have examined possible mediating variables to more thoroughly describe the relationship between family-of-origin violence and family of procreation violence (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Heggen, 1996; Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004), little research is available concerning the potentially more complex process through which individuals carry learned behaviors into the next generation. Additionally, most researchers focus on the perspective of batterers through closed-response quantitative data (e.g., Ball, 2005; Murrell, Merwin, Christoff, & Henning, 2005). For this reason, women's perspectives and meaning-making experiences have been overlooked in many ways.

### *Statement of the Problem*

One factor that has not been well-studied but that may contribute to this complex process is conflict management style as learned in one's family of origin. The purpose of this qualitative study was to further understand, from the battered woman's perspective, the process of intergenerational transmission of IPV through the specific construct of conflict management style. The study focused on the way women understand the events and situations in their lives. Findings from this study will lead to better methods of intervention that can lead to resilience in women who have experienced violence in their intimate partner relationships.

### *Assumptions*

The following assumptions are based on personal beliefs and literature. See literature review for further information regarding the sources of each listed assumption.

1. If women recall negative family-of-origin communication and conflict style, they will be more likely to participate in a violent intimate partner relationship.
2. If women recall violent or avoidant family-of-origin communication and conflict style, they will also report evidence of negative individual cognitive and emotional factors and will have high levels of participation in a violent intimate partner relationship.
3. The types of violence women perceive witnessing will affect their individual cognitive and emotional development. Women will internalize individual cognitive and emotional factors differently than men have traditionally been



found to do so (see literature review) after witnessing negative family-of-origin communication and conflict style.

4. Individual cognitive and emotional factors will be affected by the positive and negative intrafamilial and extrafamilial influences a woman experiences after witnessing negative family-of-origin communication and conflict style.
5. Couple interactional process and gender of both partners will affect the way individual cognitive and emotional factors translate into a woman's personal conflict management style.
6. A woman's personal conflict management style will affect whether she participates in a violent intimate partner relationship.

#### *Research Questions*

1. How do women relate conflict management style in their families of origin to their experiences of violence in intimate couple relationships?
2. How does a woman explain her family-of-origin experiences, her own cognitive and emotional processes, and her personal conflict management style in relation to her interactions within an intimate couple relationship?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most current research on the intergenerational transmission of intimate partner violence focuses on the social learning concept that witnessing violence in one's family of origin leads to experiencing violence in one's family of procreation (Bergen, Edelson, & Renzetti, 2005; Hines & O'Malley-Morrison, 2005), and much of this research is based on male batterers' perspectives (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). However, little research is available concerning the more complex process within the intergenerational transmission process, and few studies examine this issue from the female perspective. One of the important factors related to participation in a violent intimate partner relationship is conflict management style and how conflict influences the relation between family-of-origin violence and family of procreation violence (Roberts, 2000).

In order to better understand this link between family-of-origin conflict management style and participation in family of procreation violence, researchers need to explore more fully the complex process through which violence is passed through the generations, with specific focus on how this process works in the lives of women, rather than men only. The first important conceptualization is the relationship among communication, conflict management, and intimate partner violence in families. Conflict is inevitable in communication within couple relationships, so conflict management is an

inextricable component of communication (Pike & Sillars, 1985; Roberts, 2000). Various couples have different conflict management styles, with some falling in the healthy range and others falling on the extremes of either violence (Anglin & Holzworth-Munroe, 1997; Quigley & Leonard, 1999) or conflict avoidance (Furniss, 1984).

A closer look at these two extremes is provided by Gottman (1993). Gottman's study establishes three types of stable couples (e.g., validators, volatiles, and avoiders) and two types of instable couples (hostile and hostile/detached) based on problem-solving behavior and affect (Gottman, 1993). Conflict avoidant couples were classified as stable and lacked conflict resolution strategies. They thought that passage of time would heal their difficulties and valued time alone to deal with problems individually, putting little emphasis on give and take. They emphasized their similarities and accepted differences while putting little importance on disagreements, showing low emotion (Gottman, 1993). In a relationship characterized by these qualities, couples may remain stable in their interactions with each other, but the modeling they provide for their children does not allow children to see resolution of disagreement because parents are not working through problems in an interactive way. Additionally, children may learn the value of avoiding conflict. Anxiety may therefore be evoked each time the possibility of a conflict occurs, and this pattern may carry into intimate partner relationships.

Unstable relationships are marked by characteristics such as negative interactions, hostility, direct conflict, defensiveness, sequences marked by attacks and defenses (Gottman, 1993). In these relationships, parents model negative interaction as well as lack of ability to resolve conflict. Children may therefore come to believe that hostility is

a means for solving conflict and may experience anxiety when this method is not the one employed by others, including an intimate partner.

Although positive communication may vary from couple to couple, authors of the empirically tested marital enrichment program, PREP, report that communication skills, positive affect, problem-solving skills, support, and validation are related to good communication and conflict management (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clemente, 2004) On the other hand, negative communication and conflict management is marked by withdrawal, denial, dominance, negative affect, conflict, and negative communication (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clemente, 2004). These findings provide a link between the constructs of communication and conflict management.

### *Types of Violence*

If conflict and violence are forms of communication for the purpose of managing conflict, examining the various types of violence (as determined by a variety of correlates) is important to understanding the different experiences children have when witnessing different types of violent expression between their parents. Different outcomes for children are related to the type of violence they witness between their parents. The type of communication between parents affects the type of violence that will occur within that couple (Furniss, 1984). Furniss (1984) found that couples who avoid conflict between themselves are more likely to participate in residual violence (for example, child sexual abuse) as a result of the lack of healthy communication between themselves. Similarly, Markman and Kraft (1989) state that physical violence results partially from a couple's inability to constructively deal with conflict. In this way, violence can be viewed as systemically related to conflict-avoidance or conflict

regulation in the family, and children have the potential not only to witness violence between parents but to experience abuse themselves. Conflict avoidance appears to be detrimental to relationships as well. Stanley, Markman, and Whitton (2002) found that withdrawal by either or both partners was associated with more negativity and less positive connection. While hostility lowered the likelihood of relationship continuation, withdrawal from the partner was not a positive solution either. As related to family-of-origin issues, Wampler, Shi, Nelson, and Kimball (2003) found that individuals who are unable to clearly articulate family-of-origin experiences are also less likely to show competence in conflict resolution with a partner, and these individuals tend to show more avoidance in conflict interactions.

Regarding abusers, the personality of the abuser affects the type of violence that will occur (Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, & Shortt, 1995). Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, and Shortt have identified two types of abusers: Type I and Type II (1995). Type I abusers are more likely to have criminal backgrounds and/or personality disorders and appear to experience low levels of stress related to committing acts of violence against intimate partners. Type II abusers are more likely part of a couple in which reciprocal violence occurs (husband-to-wife as well as wife-to-husband), and these batterers experience more stress during acts of violence (Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, & Shortt, 1995). From this research, one can also derive the idea that violence can be either unidirectional or bidirectional. In this way, children can witness a wide variety of maladaptive conflict management strategies from their parents, and women who grow up in this type of atmosphere may experience differential results based on the type of negative communication witnessed.

### *Effects of Parental Violence on Children*

The mode of violence witnessed affects outcomes for children (Ball, 2005; Murrell, Merwin, Christoff, & Henning, 2005). For example, Murrell, Merwin, Christoff, and Henning (2005) found that specific modeling of violence can affect children who witness violence and later perpetrate violence. This study revealed that men who see a parent threaten or use a weapon, often do the same in their own families. In the same way, Ball (2005) asserts that the frequency and severity of violence needs to receive more research attention because the outcomes for children are variable based on the degree of violence witnessed. Male children who witness violence between their parents appear to be more likely to abuse a future partner than children who were abused themselves (Kalmuss, 1984). Witnessing aggression between parents is more predictive of future violent behavior than being abused by a parent (Kalmuss, 1984). However, the research on this point is mixed. Reese-Weber and Bartle-Haring (1997) found that parent-child relationships in adolescence are more predictive of later violence than witnessing parental violence. This study also delineates the role of sibling relationships as an important mediator between family-of-origin experiences and romantic relationship experiences (Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1997).

Furthermore, research has shown differential effects for children based on the gender of the child who witnesses the violence in parental conflict. For example, women are more likely victims of intimate partner violence than men (Kalmuss, 1984). Other research (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000) leads to the recommendation that future research focus on the separate effects on men and women after experiencing marital

conflict in the family-of-origin. These studies show the importance of understanding the impact of witnessing domestic violence for both men and women.

While children may witness violence in their families, they may also have protective resources or negative influences that help determine what cognitive and emotional aspects of their family-of-origin experience they will internalize. Resources may also act as a source of risk in the relation between viewing marital violence and development of personal cognitive and emotional processes. Information exists regarding the availability of resources to women in domestic violence situation. In a sample of rural women, Bosch and Bergen (2006) found that both informal and formal support sources do not effectively reach rural women in abusive relationships, showing blame, questioning, and misunderstanding instead of positive support (Bosch & Bergen, 2006). This lack of resources was linked with keeping women from leaving abusive partner relationships. This study found that offering assistance in a nonjudgmental way and not blaming women for the abuse they experience was important in helping women leave abusive relationships (Bosch & Bergen, 2006).

A review of the available literature shows that quality resources for women who are victims of domestic violence are lacking (see review, Shannon-Lewy, 2005). One can infer that positive resources that could act as protective factors for children witnessing negative conflict style in their families of origin may be lacking as well. On the other hand, research shows that viewing interparental violence alone is not enough to lead to domestic violence in children's later romantic relationships. Rather, viewing interpersonal violence is correlated with low levels of support, which leads to delinquency and drug use, which in turn leads to domestic violence (Simons, Lin, &

Gordon, 1998). Family-of-origin conflict affects the types of resources available to a child, and effects of these resources affect how family-of-origin conflict is translated into personal characteristics, such as behaviors within a relationship.

### *Cognitive and Emotional Factors*

While research has shown a link between witnessing parental violence and performing intimate partner violence, this direct link may be too broad and may leave out important individual contributions to the process. With an overall understanding of the family's conflict style, the effects of witnessing violence, and the possible protective factors of social resources taken into account, additional considerations within the process are individual cognitive and emotional factors. Cognitive and emotional factors serve as important considerations in the complex process that links family-of-origin conflict style to individual conflict management style in intimate partner relationships. These cognitive and emotional factors are therefore a highly important but often omitted part of the link between family of origin and intimate relationship interactions.

One factor is the perspective children have of the conflict style they witnessed in their parents. One's perspective of the negative interpersonal processes present in one's family of origin can affect whether a person carries the same marital qualities into one's own generation and/or passes those qualities to the next generation (Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004). If a male child has a positive attitude toward the violence he witnessed (i.e., finding abuse toward an intimate partner acceptable), he is more likely to behave violently toward a spouse (Jin, Eagle, & Yoshioka, 2007; O'Hearn & Margolin, 2000). Not only do individuals' perspectives affect how they interpret the violence experienced, their values are also shaped by the family of origin and in turn affect the



way they deal with conflict (Heggen, 1996). In a specific example, religious values can be a filter between what people see from their parents and what they then carry out in their own relationships. In the same way, religious values can affect decisions regarding relationships, including help-seeking behavior for women who are eventually abused (Heggen, 1996). One can also infer that other values and beliefs influence what women view as acceptable in relationships (not directly related to religion). These values may play a role in the relationship between family-of-origin communication and conflict style and participation in a violent intimate relationship as an adult.

### *The Importance of Gender*

After controlling for the mediating variables of individual cognitive and emotional factors, different outcomes are still associated with the different genders. Dumas, Margolin, and John (1994) tested the intergenerational hypothesis over three generations and found that differences existed for males and females after witnessing parental violence. While women are more likely viewed in society as victims of domestic violence (Kalmuss, 1984), women are also perpetrators, with a greater likelihood than men of performing acts of violence that cause only minor injuries (Stets, 1992). In this way, characteristics of the one commonly perceived as the victim (the woman) are important to study but are less likely to be examined for political reasons related to the feminist stance (Noller, 2006). While women's contributions are important, research reiterates the feminist perspective by stating that men and women do not perpetrate violent acts with the same frequency or severity (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992).

Research has also shown that witnessing domestic violence in women's families of origin is correlated to their victimization by an intimate partner (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). This research additionally shows that mediating variables for a woman can affect her experience in a domestic violence situation. Research ties differential marital outcomes to gender differences as well as the perception of one gender's behaviors (including hostility and withdrawal, which are forms of conflict style) by the other gender (Roberts, 2000). Research also shows that men who abuse have likely formed inaccurate views—based on their position within their gender—of appropriate power and control in relationships (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Women's contributions to violent relationships are less likely to be studied than men's contribution (Noller, 2006).

Here, the discussion of attributing responsibility to women for their part in an abusive relationship becomes complicated, and differentiating between blaming the victim and understanding systemic couple processes is critical. All too often in American society, victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them. For example, a study of newspaper writers examined how race, class, and gender permeate publications about violence perpetrated by males against women. The author of this study found that reporters often attribute violence to individual and family pathology instead of acknowledging social forces that may be at work. She found two categories of writing styles: innocent victims and those who provoke perpetration (Meyers, 1997). In this way, media may promulgate the blame that women receive for violence against them. The aim of this paper is not to implicate women in the abuse they receive from partners but to better understand the contribution of a woman's family-of-origin experiences, her own

cognitive and emotional processes, and her personal conflict management style to interactions within a couple relationship.

### *The Importance of Couple Interaction*

Individual characteristics lead to the development of a personal style of managing conflict. However, when a person enters a relationship, the individual and his or her partner both have the potential to affect whether violence occurs and whether each participates in the violent activities. Two variables that may mediate the relation between one's own conflict management style and participation in a violent relationship are couple interaction process and the gender of the partner who witnessed violence. While individual characteristics are important, couple interaction is a strong predictor of couple conflict style (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000; Kernsmith, 2006; Stets, 1992; Tallman, Gray, Kullberg, & Henderson, 1999).

Researchers have found that couple interaction is stronger than individual characteristics alone in mediating the relationship between parental divorce and couple conflict style (Tallman, Gray, Kullberg, & Henderson, 1999). One can infer that because of the relationship between parental divorce and parental conflict (Amato & Booth, 2001), couple interaction likely also affects the relationship between parental conflict style and couple conflict style. In fact, one classic study (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986) concludes by stating that couple factors are important to examine in the study of intergenerational transmission of domestic violence. Other studies have shown that couple factors are important because the wife's response can affect the batterer's behavior (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999), and the reason an argument begins can affect the type of violence that ensues (Stets, 1992). In this way, gender is important because either partner

in a relationship can affect interaction. Finally, the importance of couple interaction is evident based on research that shows different effects when one partner, neither partner, or both partners are exposed to marital violence in childhood (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). In this way, either a man or woman witnessing violence as a child can affect the way the couple interacts.

### *Women's Conflict Management Style*

If individual and couple factors are both important, and results are different for men and women, examining women's conflict management style as related to women's participation in a violent intimate partner relationship (either as the victim or co-abuser) is highly important in this discussion. Studies have shown that a person's individual factors relate to his or her conflict management style (Kernsmith, 2006). For both men and women who perpetrate violence, family-of-origin conflict leads to fear and increased feelings of threat that affect the couple relationship (Kernsmith, 2006). Also, violent, distressed couples showed lower competence in effectively handling situations that involve conflict than nonviolent, nondistressed couples (Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997). In this way, examining women's individual conflict management style is important and needs to receive attention as men's individual factors have received in the past.

### *Theoretical Background*

From a theoretical perspective, Bowen, in Bowen Family Systems Theory, posits that anxiety and insight also play a role in the development of cognitive and emotional aspects of children, and that these variables determine the way the child interacts with significant others in the future (Bowen, 1976). Bowen assumes that children who

experience triangulation into the anxiety within their parents' conflict will have an increased level of anxiety, which leads to a lower level of differentiation and lower levels of insight (Bowen, 1976). A triangle occurs when an individual tries to reduce anxiety by incorporating a third individual into a problem in a dyad. When this process occurs between parents and a child, the child receives a high level of anxiety through a process called the family projection process (Bowen, 1976). Bowen Theory asserts that differentiation and insight are necessary to decrease the occurrence of negative patterns of interaction in future generations (Bowen, 1976; Titleman, 1998). Differentiation is one side of a continuum that describes one's level of emotional reactivity to a family. Achieving differentiation requires insight (understanding) of one's own role in a family's emotional process. This state of being occurs when a person is able to define a strong sense of self, regardless of others' actions or verbal messages. The other end of the spectrum is emotional fusion, which involves being highly reactive to the emotional process of others (Bowen, 1976). Need for emotional closeness is moderated by anxiety: as anxiety increases, people need more emotional closeness, and this closeness is related to the formation of triangles (Titleman, 1998). In this way, greater anxiety—and therefore lower levels of differentiation and insight—may be associated with experiencing unhealthy family communication and subsequently developing a negative conflict management style.

### *The Current Study*

The purpose of the current study was to understand how a woman's conflict management style (based on past family-of-origin experiences) was associated with her participation in a violent intimate relationship. Researchers examined women's

experiences with their families of origin and how they relate their conflict management style and participation in violent intimate partner relationships with experiences from childhood.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the complexity of the process of intergenerational transmission. Specifically, conflict management was explored. Women reported on their experiences with conflict in their families of origin, their close personal relationships, and with intimate male partners.

#### *Participants*

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Directors of battered women's shelters within driving area from Stillwater, OK, were contacted, and flyers describing the study were distributed. Directors of shelters received information to help them understand the study and were contacted directly by phone to build rapport for the study. Directors were asked to hang flyers in visible areas so that shelter clients could obtain contact information to directly reach researchers. After women responded to flyers, participants were contacted to schedule appointments, which took place in mutually agreeable public places with confidential areas available (i.e., a meeting room in a public library or an open office at the shelter's business site).

The sample included females who were or had previously been shelter-dwellers. The sample included 32 females who were current or previous shelter-dwellers. Each of these women reported having endured abuse from a male intimate partner. Participant

ages ranged from 24-59 years. Twelve women were married at the time of the interview, with five being separated and two in the process of divorce. Seventeen women were divorced, two were never married, and one was widowed. All but two women had children. The majority of the sample reported having no income at the time of the interview. Of the sample, 25 were Caucasian, three Native American, three African American, and one African American and Hispanic.

Regarding family structure, all but two women reported having been raised in a family that did not include both biological parents. Several participants were raised by grandparents or foster families, while others grew up without a father present. Six women reported being the victims of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse or neglect as children. Several women additionally noted that their custodial parent was involved in unstable relationships, bringing partners in and out of participants' lives.

### *Procedure*

All information was obtained in a semi-structured interview format that included open-ended and probing questions. Part of the interview format included



a short-answer demographic profile section. This study was based on a pilot study (Brosi, Weaver, & Rolling, 2007) and was part of a larger study that focused on the values, beliefs, and assumptions that affect battered women's decision-making processes. See Appendix C for the interview guide for the entire study.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews took place in person and involved one researcher with one participant. The same researcher performed all interviews after an initial interview with one participant under observation by the research supervisor. Interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy of information. In compliance with Internal Review Board stipulations, informed consent was obtained. In addition, participants received \$25.00 as a thank-you for participating. Audio files were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the researchers.

### *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology in which researchers build mid-level theory through conceptual analysis (Charmaz, 2008). In this type of analysis, researchers are able to ask open-ended questions to explore a topic in depth and are careful not to bias responses through questioning style (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Typically, grounded theory involves constant comparison, in which researchers begin analysis of data during the data collection process. This analysis allows researchers to continually update research questions in order to most accurately gather information. This study employed modified grounded theory since constant comparison was not employed because this study involved secondary data analysis from existing interview transcripts. The three stages of grounded theory analysis are open, axial, and selective coding. The purpose of open coding is to allow the data to answer questions about the phenomena

presented by the emergence of patterns and groups of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding follows open coding and allows for the creation of subcategories, in which categories are linked or differential based on the properties of the data included. Subcategories further explain categories that have been created. Finally, the purpose of selective coding is to integrate the categories and themes formed in the first two steps into explanatory theory (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed a modified grounded theory process of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step, open coding, involved reading through interviews line by line and highlighting notable statements related to research assumptions. The researcher then commented on highlighted sections, creating potential codes that were a list of potential categories and subcategories and creating a data display for each category. The second step, axial coding, involved comparing categories and subcategories in the data display in order to choose elements that were consistent over time to develop emergent themes. Finally, in selective coding, codes were linked back to experience in writing a cohesive synthesis of the results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness, a term often used in qualitative studies instead of reliability and validity (Seidman, 1991), was increased by having both the coder and the supervisor review the thematic categories that emerge from data analysis. In this way, a form of inter-rater reliability was employed. Coding was performed, and the research supervisor's role was to oversee the process by helping fit emerging themes into a structure for reporting and by helping the coder examine personal biases regarding domestic violence

and conflict management. Since generalization is not necessarily the purpose of this type of qualitative study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Salkind, 2006), ethical research was practiced by ensuring that women's responses were accurately represented in analysis and reporting. This process occurred through the previously mentioned two-rater methodology.

### *Reflexivity*

Reflexivity is an important concept in qualitative inquiry and refers to researchers' understanding of their place within the study, continually monitoring themselves for bias (Daly, 2007). This concept was taken seriously throughout the course of the study by realizing that as data is interpreted, researcher ideas are likely to become part of the process. For this reason, researcher bias was analyzed as categories were created in order to determine whether women's perspectives were truly being represented. This analysis of bias occurred through check-ins with the research supervisor regarding category formation, listing of assumptions before beginning data analysis, and personal questioning during the analysis process (questions such as, "Am I interpreting this quote according to its original intent? Am I trying to make the statements fit a certain framework or letting them speak for themselves?")

### *Triangulation*

Triangulation means using multiple data points as a way of establishing validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason, an ecomap, which provides a format for understanding women's interpretation of social resources available to them (Hartman, 1995), will be part of the interview format. The use of an ecomap will assist in comparing women's responses about conflict to the types of relationships described when women

are asked about social support. In this way, congruence between themes in women's reports can be checked. Additionally, researcher interpretation adds an additional checkpoint for congruence.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As participants expressed their experiences with conflict throughout their lives, three overarching themes emerged. First, women described ways in which the conflict patterns from their families of origin repeated within their own lives and relationships. Second, participants described ways that their ability to manage conflict in their preferred way was hindered by overwhelming anxiety about conflict. Finally, the messages women received from their families of origin, coupled with their experiences of isolation within couple relationships, appeared to leave women with a problematic set of beliefs about relationships and few resources to gain adaptive relationship skills. Repeating Family

#### Conflict Patterns

##### *Family-of-Origin Conflict Process*

The first emergent overarching theme involved a repetition of family conflict patterns. Furthermore, within this overarching theme, three sub-themes emerged, including parental, individual, and couple conflict process. Participants' families of origin appeared to deal with conflict with violence and hostility, by avoiding conflict, or by resolution of the problem. Approximately half of participants reported that the families in which they were raised dealt with conflict using violence/hostility; half of participants reported that their families avoided conflict; and one participant witnessed conflict

resolution. For simplicity, the term “parents” will be used to describe the primary couple relationship participants witnessed in their families of origin.

*Use of violence or hostility.* First, the majority of women stated that their parents displayed extreme conflict management patterns (Gottman, 1993) of either avoiding conflict through not arguing, using substances, or divorcing; or by engaging in violence or hostility. Participants described situations in which they saw their parents dealing with conflict in a way that employed hitting, yelling, and screaming. Some of this violence was physical, as shown by statements such as this response to the question of how families of origin handled conflict: “Usually knock down, drag out fist fight.” Some violence was emotional: “I saw the emotional abuse growing up...they would do it right in front of us.” Others displayed an atmosphere of constant hostility: “Turbulent. There was a lot of turmoil. They fought quite a bit.” Some women who viewed violence in their own families of origin noted that they saw that the violence was hurtful but were not able to create a different atmosphere in their own couple relationships: “And I started seeing that our family was dysfunctional...but I also realized that for me, living in the situation I knew was kind of normal because that’s how my mother lived.” In this way, it seems that women who viewed violence or hostility in their families of origin did not learn a set of skills necessary for creating a nonviolent or non-hostile situation in their own intimate relationships. Reflecting the described thoughts of many participants, one woman even described a feeling of comfort with conflictual situations. Regarding conflict, she stated, “I think I feed off into it. You know, it’s like if there’s not any drama going on or if there’s not any conflict, then I feel real bored or that my life don’t have any meaning.” In this way, Bowen’s concept of anxiety is evident (Bowen, 1976). Bowen asserts that

parents who are undifferentiated often involve their children in their conflict, creating a triangle in which a child bears part of the anxiety experienced between parents. Children learn that feelings of anxiety are normal in close relationships and that one should share the emotional distress felt by others. This process, called emotional fusion, leads to overfunctioning and the need to reduce conflict by making others feel as little anxiety as possible, even if that means taking the anxiety upon themselves. A level of comfort with what is normal (anxiety-ridden connection with others) occurs, and changing the situation—even to a more adaptive state—would create anxiety.

*Use of avoidance.* Participants described ways that they saw their parents either actively avoiding conflict through use of substances, pretending conflict did not exist, physically leaving conflictual situations, or through simply omitting conflict talk from their family experience. Women described substance use in terms of avoiding a difficult situation: “They either shut it out or they drank...it was,... ‘If you don’t see it, it’s not there.’” Others described ignoring problems: “My family just sweeps everything that’s uncomfortable under a rug.” Another woman stated, “And even if there were problems, they were venerated over to where you didn’t see them anyway.” Women noted that their parents left uncomfortable situations: “My mom would leave, and she’d go to the boat or up to the cabin, and they’d have a little break, couple of days.” In this way, active avoidance methods were employed. Finally, omission of conflict talk was evident in the following statements: “I mean, they didn’t have any conflict.” “I don’t know if my parents had problems or not, but I don’t think so.” “Yeah, I don’t remember anything bad ever happening.” These women appeared to receive messages that relationships should not involve conflict and depend upon finding the right person who is a good fit to make

things work. One participant noted, “That’s how it’s supposed to work. Love should not be work.” Regarding finding the right man, one woman stated, “[I don’t] handle my problems as well as, you know, in my relationships as well as they are able to, you know, because I haven’t found the right person yet.”

For these women, similarly to the women who witnessed violence and hostility, active modeling of positive conflict resolution did not occur, leaving women without a repertoire of healthy ways to manage conflict. Additionally, when faced with conflict that is inevitable in relationships (Pike & Sillars, 1985; Roberts, 2000), their anxiety surfaced and intensified, which further inhibited their ability to deal effectively with problems at hand. Several women reported feeling physical symptoms related to anxiety about conflict. For example, one woman stated, “I really don’t like conflict. It causes me physical...I mean, I’ve had two bleeding ulcers, so it’s not. It affects. It can’t say it doesn’t. It does. I just got to where I avoided it.” For this woman, the anxiety of dealing with something she had not previously witnessed led to a new type of anxiety, causing physical pain. This anxiety, rather than direct modeling alone, led her to use the same conflict tactics employed by her parents. This information demonstrates that the process of intergenerational transmission involves more complex dynamics than social learning.

This process of adopting others’ anxiety is similar to that experienced by women who witnessed violence and hostility, fitting Bowen’s position that triangulation in parental conflict leads to lowered differentiation in children (Bowen, 1976). Anxiety does not have to be overt to be felt. Children who observe their parents’ affect may note changes in level of distress and feel the need to comfort a parent in the midst of a conflict. In this way, children can learn the same type of emotional fusion as children



who are actively involved in their parents' conflict. Another possible outcome of this process is that children may feel anxiety, but because of lack of discussion or resolution, they may learn that conflict is something too difficult to talk about. In this way, avoidance of the problem is a learned pattern that has proven to be adaptive in the family of origin. Emotional cutoff may occur because dealing directly with an issue leads to heightened anxiety that should be avoided.

*Use of conflict resolution.* One participant described a form of conflict resolution in which her parents would physically leave a conflict but later return to discuss the issues more calmly. She stated, "Oh, she'd go to the room and close the door, and he'd go outside and water the yard. Once their tempers cooled down, they'd talk." This participant learned, "That problems can be solved without hitting each other. That you can talk things out." Given that she was in the study because of an abusive intimate relationship raises questions of how she came to experience violence even when she had witnessed positive modeling. Thus, this participant may still have not witnessed specific modeling of positive conflict management or may have received maladaptive messages about relationships in other ways, which further highlights the nature of anxiety that can be adopted in relationships.

Most women in this study did not see conflict resolution modeled but instead were very aware of the tension between parents. Whether they saw abuse and hostility, witnessed avoidance tactics, or were not exposed to parents' communication process, they did not learn how conflict can be appropriately handled. They also seem to have acquired a certain level of anxiety around the idea of conflict, leading to potential problems in their own management of conflict. Bowen's concepts of emotional fusion

and cutoff fit well with these women's stories, indicating that the anxiety experienced in one's family of origin carries into the way an individual approaches interaction in the future.

### *Individual Conflict Process*

Second, most women stated that as individuals, they deal with conflict on the same extremes as their parents by either avoiding conflict or engaging in hostile behaviors. No participant described ways that she resolved conflicts with others in her life. Most women indicated that they do not deal with conflict or that they actively avoid situations that may involve conflict and when pushed to a limit, respond with violence or hostility. Conveying the same message as many participants, one woman stated, "If it's somebody that I really have to have conflict with, I just avoid them and push them out of my life." Avoidance tactics participants describe using include not verbalizing negativity or true feelings if they are negative, walking away, not getting involved in the conflicts of others, substance use, and avoiding the person until he or she is in a better mood.

Other women noted that they react with violence or hostility when approached with conflict. One participant stated, "I scream, I scream, I scream. And I am so quick to fight." These types of reactions also included threats, arguing, seeking out conflict and "drama," getting in someone's face, and losing control of one's emotions. This finding fits with the idea that women have their own personal methods of dealing with conflict and that they bring these processes into their relationships (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). Additionally, some women viewed talking out an issue as the best way to deal with conflict but indicated that they believed someone else was in control of the outcome of the conversation.

The feeling of inability to have autonomy over a situation may indicate fusion with significant others (Bowen, 1976). This fusion would lead to acting in a way that aims to comfort the other person at the cost of one's own comfort with the situation. Women seeking to comfort a partner in conflict might do so at their own expense, even to the point of blaming themselves for the conflict or violence in order to make sure that a partner does not feel anxiety about the situation. Similarly, Landenburger (1989) found that one of the stages of development in an abusive relationship is when a woman owns responsibility for the abuse and feels trapped in the relationship, losing her sense of self. Others noted that they only started conflictual conversations when the situation was desperate enough to outweigh the anxiety a conversation would cause. For example, one participant stated, "You have to come to a conclusion, or you're not going to be able to go on." This common theme among participants showed a tendency toward ensuring that the conflict ended in a way that allowed the partner to avoid anxiety. If the partner felt satisfied rather than anxious, the participant's anxiety was quelled for the moment.

#### *Couple Conflict Process*

Third, women state that with their abusive partners, the couple process involved either of these same two extremes. Some women fought back to violence, and some women avoided conflict. Participants described either a regular pattern or incidences in which they reacted violently or with hostility to their abusive partner. Violence was used as either a way of standing up for oneself or was the result of emotional reactivity. Regarding her own behavior in her abusive relationship, one woman stated that during a fight, "I at first would scream and yell back, and I just got to where I wouldn't fight back at all, and then I started fighting back..." Another woman noted, "I was probably just as

mean as he was, just in a different way. Not that I abused him, but I did my little things to get back at him.” In this way, women appear to have positive motivations (to create better relationship circumstances) but are unable to appropriately effect the desired changes. This inability to resolve conflict may be in part the lack of positive modeling from parents regarding healthy ways of resolving conflict. A more in-depth description involves the role of anxiety (Bowen, 1976) as a prevention of positive relationship skills. These women describe ways that they feel unable to control the interaction between themselves and a partner, stemming from the previously discussed need to make a relationship “okay” for others but not for themselves. This fits with research showing that women experience psychological symptoms after leaving an abusive relationship (Forte, Cohen, Du Mont, Hyman, & Romans, 2005). When this anxiety surfaces, women are unable to implement the healthy “middle ground” of communication and resort to the extremes they have learned: avoidance until a breaking point followed by hostility or violence. This constantly self-reinforcing pattern of undifferentiation adds to a woman’s process of defining herself by her relationships and the opinions of others (Landenburger, 1989). If she can decrease anxiety through fusion with her partner, she will continue to do so because the process seems to work.

Participants described using avoidance as a way of managing conflict, rather than dealing with conflict in a way that leads to resolution. According to Gottman (1998), the most important factor in relationship stability is that couples come back together in a reparative way after an argument. Avoidance occurred by agreeing with the partner whether truly in agreement or not. One woman stated, “I would try to walk away from it, instead of having an argument with him, or I’d just say, ‘Okay, (name), you know,

whatever. Um, it's your house, whatever you want to do, you know, that's fine.'"

Avoidance additionally occurred through an attitude of, "if you can't beat them, join them," leading to substance abuse along with the partner. As one woman stated, "And then I started drinking, and I started trying all the stuff." In this way, participants appear to be anxious about conflict, either avoiding disagreement (Furniss, 1984) or becoming emotionally reactive (Markman & Kraft, 1989). At the same time, women noted that they avoided conflict in many circumstances to avoid further pain and abuse. According to Johnson (2006), several types of violence can occur, with a basic difference being whether the conflict is mutual or whether one partner seeks power and control through violent tactics. The type of violence that is not mutual often results in the abused partner experiencing constant fear because of the intensity of the violent partner's actions. For this reason, women in this type of relationship who did stand up for themselves in conflictual situations exhibited a strong sense of self because they knew the consequences of disagreeing with their abusers.

Described negative relationship interaction patterns fit those described in the literature regarding couple communication (Furniss, 1984; Markman & Kraft, 1989). The finding that conflict patterns appear to be similar from family of origin to individual and couple process fits with Bowen's theory (Bowen, 1976) that high anxiety and attempts to cut off from engaging with others may be descriptive of an undifferentiated stance regarding relationships. The need to take on a partner's anxiety leads to undifferentiation and lack of a strong I-position that would allow a woman to make changes in an abusive relationship. On the other hand, individuals who are able to stand for themselves amidst high levels of anxiety display higher degrees of differentiation. Women who did bring up

anxiety-ridden topics may have been creating a stronger I-position and developing a more differentiated stance in their relationships. Leaving the relationship and going to the shelter may have been a large step toward differentiation, and the social support found at shelters could serve to increase feelings of self-efficacy so that women are more able to continue exploring the value of their own opinions and beliefs. At the same time, a caution is that because past research (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004; Griffing, Ragin, Morrison, & Sage, 2005) has shown that women often return to abusive relationships, this leaving could be a form of emotional cutoff. An important note is that the process of this interview, which placed the woman in an expert position (telling the story of her life), may have added to this process of differentiation and I-position establishment.

#### Overridden Anxiety Processes

Next, women in this sample seemed to repeat patterns from previous generations due to an overwhelming sense of anxiety about changing the interaction patterns they saw as children. When women stated that they operate at the same extremes of conflict management as their parents, they seem to express that they feel anxiety at the idea of changing their learned and practiced conflict process. Bowen (1976) supports this idea with theory that states anxiety patterns create the intergenerational transmission of negative interactional patterns. On the other hand, participants are able to describe quality conflict management methods (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clemente, 2004). Women who were mothers stated that they wanted their sons and daughters to learn to talk out problems, compromise, let one's feelings be known, come to a resolution, understand that conflict is inevitable, and not to avoid dealing with issues by using substances. However, participants do not appear to be practicing their advice in their own

lives. Further, these women discuss hopes for their children in relationships but do not seem to provide positive modeling for their children, in much the same way that their own parents did not provide positive modeling for them.

Women frequently expressed the belief that their children would be able to take negative experiences and do something different because they witnessed negatives. In this way, participants express a deeply felt desire for their children to have better lives than they have experienced, yet their own relational modeling does not give their children a positive example to emulate. This process leads to a lower ability to effectively teach appropriate conflict management to children. This dynamic is especially well-illustrated by the following quote by one participant:

I don't know what my daughter's going to get because she's seen a lot. I think she's smart enough to take everything that she's seen and learned and know what's right and wrong. She does get a little crazy when she fights with her boyfriends, but I don't know, maybe that's puppy love. I hope she didn't get that from me.

This finding is further exemplified by the way women talk about their families of origin. Information about family of origin was usually vague or simplistic, as in the following quote by one participant: "I was very dominant whenever I was younger because I watched my mom get beat my entire life." Although this woman changed her conflict style, the new style was not adaptive to positive conflict management with partners. These women's experiences fit with the findings of Wampler, Shi, Nelson, and Kimball (2003), who found that individuals who are unable to clearly articulate family-of-origin experiences are also less likely to show competence in conflict resolution with a partner.

Lack of insight about conflict processes may be the result of being inducted into the undifferentiated family ego mass (Bowen, 1976) and therefore being unable to objectively understand the interaction between parents. In the future and in their own relationships, the inability to explain how problematic situations came to be disallows them from preventing these situations in their own lives.

Although women are able to describe positive conflict management techniques and communication skills (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clemente, 2004), their own anxiety about conflict appears to override their ability to implement such techniques in their own lives. Women then model patterns similar to those witnessed in their own families of origin, providing modeling to their children that mirrors that which they received. This fits findings from previous literature stating that one's attitudes toward violence affects how one deals with the issue in one's own relationships (Heggen, 1996). Incomplete understanding of the process of intergenerational transmission prevents women from understanding the effects that their relationship modeling may have on their children, although these mothers' intentions for their children are for well-being and relationships free of violence. Transmission of anxiety processes affect what women pass to their children by keeping women from being able to understand the process that allows good communication to occur.

#### Personal Social and Emotional Factors

Finally, women's personal social and emotional factors seem to fit the Bowen concepts of emotional fusion and cutoff (Bowen, 1976). Inability to clearly articulate positive messages learned about relationships from their families of origin indicates that they were likely triangulated into their parents' anxiety, which kept them from feeling



free to develop more positive relational skills. Most participants indicated either deficit learning (how not to have a relationship) or a lack of learning about relationship skills (no messages received). One woman stated, “My mom, I learned to not be like her. To not hurt people.” Many women, when asked what messages they received from their families about relationships, replied, “None,” or “Nothing.” Many participants received messages indicating that marriage is valuable and should be made to work although it is not always a positive arrangement. Others noted that they learned that relationships are bad, hurtful, or impermanent. Regarding roles, half of participants indicated that their families of origin had involved traditional gender roles and that they had been taught to sacrifice for one’s husband and children. One-third of participants discussed the egalitarian or female-headed households of their families of origin, while the remainder of participants stated that they received no messages about appropriate roles in families.

From these messages, women learned to define themselves within the context of relationships. Nearly every participant described a level of isolation experienced in their relationships, which did not foster an environment of learning more positive relationship messages. Many women had no chance of outside support in their relationship, reporting that, “I was not supposed to leave the house or open door and let someone while he was gone.” In this way, women were not able to develop a stronger sense of self within the relationships. This combined with the need to define oneself by one’s relationships seemed to decrease women’s ability to be autonomous and differentiated. Resulting actions involved either becoming fused with a partner to the point of reacting based on his emotions or emotional cutoff as evidenced by avoiding engagement in conflict altogether. This idea fits Bowen’s concept of emotional fusion (Bowen, 1976), in which

one judges his or her worth by others' perceptions and fits the idea of cutoff in which anxiety prevents an individual from directly managing conflictual situations.

Additionally, Bosch and Bergen's (2006) discussion of lack of helpful resources for women in domestic violence situations fits with this theme. Women noted that their experience in the shelters was helpful because they were able to interact with other women who had similar stories. This social support appeared to act as continued motivation to remain free from abusive relationships.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Themes in women's descriptions of their life stories regarding conflict serve to highlight three main ideas that are important to consider in work with a domestic violence population. First, intergenerational transmission of violence occurs not only because of negative modeling (Hines & O'Malley-Morrison, 2005) but because patterns of anxiety are passed from generation to generation (Bowen, 1976). Women who are triangulated into their parents' anxiety processes as children learn that they must take care of others before themselves and use this principle in their intimate partner relationships. This process leads to protecting intimate partners from feeling anxiety and instead taking that anxiety upon themselves. In this way, women do not learn to have a strong sense of self and are dependent upon others' reactions to define themselves within the context of relationships. If that relationship involves abuse, women blame themselves and attempt to protect their partner from conflict. Depending on another's reactions prevents women from stating their needs, communicating their true feelings, and standing up for themselves in conflict. These positive communication processes are necessary for healthy conflict resolution in an intimate partner relationship (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clemente, 2004).

Next, lack of taught messages regarding relationships as well as social isolation also hinder women from developing a strong sense of self. When women are isolated within relationships, they are further mired in unhealthy beliefs about relationships. However, when women are able to find social support and understanding within shelters, they become more able to stay away from abusive relationships while learning new, more positive relationship skills (Merrell, 2001). Social support from others with similar stories allows for emotional space to begin examining one's own beliefs about self and relationships. Exposure to others' stories allows women to learn that their experience is not the only possible reality, and they are able to explore the possibilities of changing the conflict processes that feel normal.

Finally, these patterns occurred in a sample of female participants, supporting the idea that women bring personal conflict patterns into abusive relationships (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Although women should never be held responsible for the abuse they endure in violent relationships, understanding the couple process rather than simply the abuser's pattern of interaction may be crucial to decreasing the experience of violence in these types of relationships. Research has shown that different conflict patterns occur in intimate partner relationships based on whether one or both partners witnessed violence (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). When women experience intergenerational transmission of negative conflict patterns, their conflict patterns carry to their interactions with others as well as with intimate partners. Whether the male partner has also learned negative a conflict management style or not, a woman still interacts with him in the way that feels normal to her. Put together, the man's process of conflict management and the woman's create a couple interactional cycle (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).

### *Clinical Implications*

In clinical work, these findings have several applications. A Bowen Family Systems approach (Titleman, 1998) will be helpful in assisting women who have been in violent intimate partner relationships to gain a sense of self through differentiation and development of an I-position (Bowen, 1976). Since this theory fits well with the experience of battered women, the model will be especially helpful in working with women for whom violence has been an intergenerational pattern. Through the use of Genograms (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999), women can gain insight about the ways that patterns of interaction in their families of origin affect them. A Bowen therapist would attempt to decrease anxiety in the therapy room while assisting a client in gaining cognitive awareness of the ways anxiety has played a role in her life (Titleman, 1998). When a client is able to understand how interaction from the past has affected her, she will be able to apply this understanding to her current behaviors and emotions, becoming more tolerant of emotional anxiety within intimate relationships. With increased anxiety tolerance, women are able to understand themselves from their own perspective without dependence on the opinions of others. In this way, women can learn to judge their worth by their own standards rather than through the perspective of partners, family members, or others. After interviewing with this study, many participants noted that they enjoyed the process of talking about their stories and indicated that they had not been able to do so since entering the shelter. For this reason, allowing women to tell their stories in a way that allows them to be the experts of their own lives appears to give them a sense of self-efficacy and assist in the process of developing an I-position and differentiation.

Next, other insight-based models that have behavioral components such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (Baucom & Epstein, 1990) may be useful for this population. The combination of insight-oriented models with behavioral principles appears to be more affective than simply working toward behavioral change (Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991). These models help women gain insight about beliefs regarding relationship functioning that may have been learned in their families of origin. In addition to focusing on the role of anxiety, women will benefit from exploring the messages they have received from their families. Understanding what messages have been internalized will assist women in eliminating problematic beliefs. Additionally, the behavioral part of this therapy may provide women opportunities to develop healthy patterns of interaction within relationships. CBT focuses on specific homework given by the therapist to the client to effect change even outside of session (Baucom & Epstein, 1990)). A therapist might assign a homework task in which a client is to chart her thoughts related to a specific interpersonal interaction as well as her reactions to the situation. In session, the therapist would be able to process how the interaction could have been improved based on cognitive perception of the event.

Since couples are often both contributors to negative interactional cycles, couples therapy will be helpful in many cases where violence is mild or mutual (McCollum & Stith, 2007). In this setting, couples together will better understand their interaction and learn proactive relationship skills, especially as related to conflict management. Therapists should examine the process of interaction when a couple fights. Therapists should assess for how the fight starts, emotions surrounding the fight, what happens that causes the fight escalate, and how the couple ends the disagreement or returns to the

issue. Important factors to consider are the frequency and severity of fights. Couples therapists can work to help the couple understand the cycle of interaction, including vulnerabilities that lead to negative reactions (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004). Then, therapists can assist in coaching couples through more positive interaction and conflict resolution (Davis & Butler, 2004). Couples therapy must be approached carefully, and safety contracts should be a routine part of therapy when violence is a presenting issue. These findings also have implications for premarital education or counseling practices. Premarital service providers should be aware of and assess for risk factors in the relationship while providing skills training that will benefit the couple in the future (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

Finally, psychoeducation is part of a holistic approach to working with women who have been abused (Merrell, 2001). Therapists who are able to include psychoeducation about violence in relationships will also be helpful for this population. Women and men who have been in abusive relationships will benefit from learning about basic relationship skills that are necessary for positive communication (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clemente, 2004), including making I-statements, responding empathically, and appropriate conflict resolution methods. Also, couples and individuals will benefit from learning about types of abuse, cycles of abusive behavior, the effects of witnessing violence on children, ways to prevent violence from occurring, and ways to protect oneself in the case of an abusive event.

### *Limitations*

The most important limitation of this study is that the analysis does not differentiate between common couple violence and intimate partner terrorism (Johnson,

2006). Johnson suggests that women's contributions to the conflict process within an intimate relationship may differ based on the type of violence incurred (M. Johnson, personal communication, November 8, 2008). For example, in relationships that contain common couple violence, a woman may be more able to affect the interaction whereas in a relationship in which intimate partner terrorism is present (by the male partner), the woman is less likely to be able to affect interactions. In future studies, this factor may be highly important to consider in order to avoid attributing responsibility for interaction to those who truly have no control over the situation.

A second limitation may be the selection process for this study. Nearly all participants stated that they had involved in the nursing profession or desired to be so. One may conclude that these women, perhaps more so than the general population, had a desire to help others and may have been self-selected for the research as a way of "taking care" of a perceived need of the researchers to complete a project). Another factor in volunteer participation involved was the offered monetary compensation for being interviewed. Since most women reported having no income at the time of the interview, this compensation may have been a factor in the decision to participate more than expected by the researchers. Finally, a snowball effect likely occurred for women who had a good experience with the interview process since several women from one shelter often volunteered for the study after one or more had been through the interview process. These limitations based on sampling procedures may have affected the data by making findings less generalizable to the overall population of battered women.



### *Future Directions*

Intergenerational transmission of conflict patterns in violent intimate partner relationships is an important topic of research and deserves further study. Additional qualitative studies with an even wider variation in participant demographics will be important to learn more about the complex process of intergenerational transmission, especially as it relates to conflict patterns. Overall, greater attention should be placed on the specific issue of conflict management as an important aspect of couple interaction and domestic violence. Additionally, future research should focus on the ways that positive interaction, communication, and conflict management patterns are transmitted intergenerationally. In this way, researchers may be able to better understand how to help those who have received negative modeling and messages to overcome the past and create adaptive situations for future generations.

Further research will benefit society by providing more ways that shelters can help women create strong senses of self, learn positive relationship skills, and maintain social support. Research should also focus on the impact of therapy that targets intergenerational issues provided in and outside of shelters. Greater understanding of the efficacy of different therapy models will help therapists, shelter clinicians, and other service providers disseminate quality information and assistance to women who have experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A  
Concept Map



Appendix B  
Concept Map Notes

## Concept Notes

*Note 1.* Research has linked violence as a form of communication with the finding that severe violence is correlated with high conflict. In this way, violence is described as a possible outcome of conflict (Quigley & Leonard, 1999).

*Note 2.* On the other hand, research has shown conflict avoidance to be an unhealthy form of communication. Common assumptions are that effective communication requires facing rather than avoiding conflict (Pike & Sillars, 1985).

*Note 3.* Additionally, research links the way a family communicates and deals with conflict with the type of abuse that occurs (Furniss, 1984). In this way, one could consider any type of family violence to be related systemically to the way the family deals with conflict.

*Note 4.* Research shows that witnessing marital aggression is a stronger predictor of marital aggression than being abused by a parent (Kalmuss, 1984). For this reason, the experience of witnessing parental conflict style is likely more predictive of individual conflict style than being abused personally in one's family of origin.

*Note 5.* Violence can occur and be experienced in many different ways. An examination of the relationship between men witnessing domestic violence in their family of origin and being violent toward their wives shows that the types of abuse observed is important in addition to studying whether observation of abuse occurred. These findings show that chronic and severe abuse is most predictive of future abusive behavior. Additionally, measuring both the severity and frequency was found to be more effective than studying either construct alone (Ball, 2005).

*Note 6.* Next, two types of abusers have been identified, which affects the way violence is experienced in the family. Type I abusers are more likely to have criminal backgrounds and/or personality disorders and appear to experience low levels of stress related to committing acts of violence against intimate partners. Type II abusers are more likely part of a couple in which reciprocal violence occurs (husband-to-wife as well as wife-to-husband), and these batterers experience more stress during acts of violence (Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, & Shortt, 1995). From this research, one can also derive the idea that more than one type of violence can occur: unidirectional or bidirectional.

*Note 7.* Research based on Social Learning Theory posits that a direct relationship exists between witnessing parental violence and participating in a violent intimate relationship in adulthood (Bergen, Edelson, & Renzetti, 2005; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000; Hines & O'Malley-Morrison, 2005).

*Note 8.* In addition to the types of violence witnessed, research has shown differential effects of parental conflict based on gender. For example, women are more likely victims of intimate partner violence than men (Kalmuss, 1984). Other research (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000) leads to the recommendation that future research focus on the separate effects on men and women after experiencing marital conflict in the family of origin.

*Note 9.* Finally, specific modeling of the mode of violence can affect children who witness violence and later perpetrate violence. For example, one study revealed that men who see a parent threaten or use a weapon often do the same in their own families (Murrell, Merwin, Christoff, & Henning, 2005).

*Note 10.* In the link between family or origin communication and conflict management style in adult romantic relationships, several mediating variables have been established by past research. One of those mediators is the individual's perspective of the violence witnessed in the family of origin (Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004). One's perspective of the negative interpersonal processes present in one's family of origin can affect whether a person carries the same marital qualities into one's own generation and/or passes those qualities to the next generation (Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004).

*Note 11.* In a similar fashion, research has shown that positive attitudes toward marital violence is a mediator and/or moderator between exposure to violence and performing marital violence (Jin, Eagle, & Yoshioka, 2007; O'Hearn & Margolin, 2000).

*Note 12.* Next, religious values can be a filter between what people see from their parents and what they then carry out in their own relationships. In the same way, religious values can affect decisions regarding relationships, including help-seeking behavior for women who are eventually abused (Heggen, 1996). In this way, it is also hypothesized that other values and beliefs (not directly related to religion) may play a role in the mediating relationship between family-of-origin communication and conflict style and participation in a violent intimate relationship as an adult.

*Note 13.* Finally, the theoretical lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory posits that children who experience triangulation into the anxiety within their parents' conflict will have an increased level of anxiety, which leads to a lower level of differentiation and lower levels of insight. Bowen Theory asserts that differentiation and insight are



necessary to decrease the occurrence of negative patterns of interaction in future generations (Bowen, 1976; Titleman, 1998).

*Note 14.* Family-of-origin communication and conflict affects the resources available to a child. Research shows that viewing interparental violence alone is not enough to lead to committing domestic violence. Rather, viewing interpersonal violence is correlated with low levels of support, which leads to delinquency and drug use, which in turn leads to domestic violence (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998).

*Note 15.* A review of the available literature shows that helpful resources for women who are victims of domestic violence are lacking in quality (Shannon-Lewy, 2005). Similarly, it is assumed that positive resources that could act as protective factors for children witnessing negative conflict style in their families of origin may be lacking as well.

*Note 16.* After examining the mediating variables of individual cognitive and emotional factors, different outcomes are still associated with the different genders. While women are more likely viewed as victims of domestic violence (Kalmuss, 1984), women are also perpetrators, with a greater likelihood than men of performing acts of violence that cause only minor injuries (Stets, 1992). In this way, characteristics of the one commonly perceived as the victim (the woman) is important to study but is less likely to be examined for political reasons related to the feminist stance (Noller, 2006). While women's contribution is important, research reiterates the feminist perspective by stating that men and women do not perpetrate violent acts with the same frequency or severity (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992).

*Note 17.* Research has additionally shown that witnessing domestic violence in women's families of origin was correlated to her victimization by an intimate partner (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). This research shows that mediating variables for women can affect her experience in a domestic violence situation.

*Note 18.* Research ties differential marital outcomes to gender differences as well as the perception of one gender's behaviors (including hostility and withdrawal, which are forms of conflict style) by the other gender (Roberts, 2000).

*Note 19.* Research also shows that men who abuse have likely formed inaccurate views—based on their position within their gender—of appropriate power and control in relationships (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

*Note 20.* Researchers have found that while individual factors affect conflict style, couple-level factors (the way the couple interacts) are stronger mediators between parental divorce and couple conflict style (Tallman, Gray, Kullberg, & Henderson, 1999). One can infer that because of the relationship between parental divorce and parental conflict (Amato & Booth, 2001), couple factors likely also mediate the relationship between parental conflict style and couple conflict style.

*Note 21.* In fact, one classic study (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986) concludes by stating that couple factors are important to examine in the study of intergenerational transmission of domestic violence.

*Note 22.* Other studies have shown that couple factors are important because the wife's response can affect the batterer's behavior (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999), and the reason an argument begins can affect the type of violence that ensues (Stets, 1992). Finally, the importance of couple factors is evident based on research that shows

different effects when one partner, neither partner, or both partners are exposed to marital violence in childhood (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000).

*Note 23.* Studies have shown that a person's individual factors relate to a person's conflict management style. For both men and women who perpetrate violence, family-of-origin conflict leads to fear and increased feelings of threat that affect the couple relationship (Kernsmith, 2006). Also, violent, distressed couples showed lower competence in effectively handling situations that involve conflict than nonviolent, nondistressed couples (Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997).

*Note 24.* The current study seeks to understand how a woman's conflict management style (based on past family-of-origin experiences) leads her to participate in an intimate relationship that is or becomes violent. The proposed study will examine the relations between each of the variables listed on the Concept Map, with specific focus on the relationship between women's experiences with their families of origin and their conflict management style and, in turn, their participation in violent intimate partner relationships.

Appendix C  
Interview Guide

# Interview Guide

Note: Questions specifically used for this study are in italics.

## **Orientation to Process:**

- Review consent procedures
- What questions can I answer for you about this study, your involvement, or what to expect during this process? (Review confidentiality of interview content).

## **Demographic Profile Questions:**

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex: Male; Female
3. Marital Status: Single never married; Single divorced; Single widowed; In committed partnered relationship; Married 1st time; Married 2<sup>nd</sup> time; etc.
4. Children: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Ethnicity: African American, Asian American, Caucasian Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, other
6. Education level: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Income / SES: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Describe your relationship with your abusive partner.**

- How long have you been together? \_\_\_\_\_
- How long has the relationship been abusive? \_\_\_\_\_
- Type of abuse (physical, psychological, emotional, sexual): \_\_\_\_\_
- Frequency and severity of the abuse? \_\_\_\_\_
- Have you been in other abusive relationships in the past? Describe \_\_\_\_\_
- At what point did you recognize the relationship to be abusive? \_\_\_\_\_
- Have you ever left/sought help before; if so, describe your experience?
  - What was the outcome?
- How old were you when you entered the relationship?

## **Ecomap Completion**

- Tell me about the important people, groups, and organizations in your life.
  - What factors (perhaps: social entities; values and beliefs; etc.) do you feel stand out the most in influencing your decision to leave
- What is your relationship like with each of these?
  - Draw relationship lines based on responses
- How have they influenced how you got here (the present)?
- How does/did your family and friends feel about the relationship?
- Do you or did you have support from friends and family to leave/seek help?
  - How did this shape your decision?
    - i. Isolation?
    - ii. Safety?

- iii. Shame/embarrassment?
- iv. Nature of the relationship(s)?
- How has religion or spirituality influenced your values, beliefs, and assumptions (as they pertain to women, marriage, divorce, family roles, etc)?
- How did your family react to your relationship(s)?
  - What did that communicate to you?
- Which groups or subgroups had the most impact on you, how and why?
- What affect did your partner's values, beliefs, and assumptions have on your own? (did you share certain values, beliefs, and assumptions)
- Major incidences (catalyst) that shaped your VBA's

### **Interview / Probing Questions:**

#### **General relationship questions:**

How do/did you feel about the relationship?

#### **Decision-making questions:**

How did you decide to come to the shelter?

- I imagine this was difficult for you...what made it difficult?
- Was this a slow process or was there a single incident that resulted in your decision to leave/seek help? (describe either the slow process and what changed or the single incident)
- Have you ever considered leaving/seeking help and decided not to?
  - Why?
  - What influenced this decision?
  - What would have made it easier for you?
    - Resource availability; family/friend support; self-worth

### **~TAKE BREAK~**

#### **Check in with Participant regarding process and interest in continuing**

#### **What values, beliefs, and assumptions were communicated through your family of origin?**

- *Describe your parent's relationship (what VBA was communicated?)*
  - *What do you feel you learned from their example?*
  - *How does your family of origin deal with conflict?*
  - *How do you deal with conflict?*
    - *How did you and your abusive partner deal with conflict?*
    - *What did an average fight look like?*
  - *What advice did your family of origin offer to you about relationships?*
  - *What would you teach your children based on where you are now?*
  - *What do you hope your children learn about dealing with conflict?*
- *What did your parents teach you about the role of a wife and a woman?*
- *How does your family of origin view marriage and divorce?*

- *Would you say you share similar values, beliefs, and assumptions as your family of origin?*

**What values, beliefs, and assumptions were communicated through the community?**

- What pressure, if any, was there to conform within the community?
- What are the community norms? (what is the average age for marriage)
- What resources were available? (Perceptions of resources both of the community and yourself)
- How did the community or would the community have reacted to your relationship?
  - How did you react to their knowing...
  - What are/were your fears...
  - Gossip in the community; Status; Rural/Urban

**Her personal values, beliefs, and assumptions**

- What are your views on marriage and divorce? (gender roles)
- What needs did the relationship meet?
- How would you describe your ideal self?
  - Who do you see yourself as now?

**Which values, beliefs, or assumptions were most salient in your relationship? (How were they prioritized?)**

- How did isolation affect your view of the relationship?
- As the abuse began or progressed, did you experience any confusion over your values, beliefs, and assumptions?
  - Did you feel any discomfort or unrest due to these values, beliefs, or assumptions, (please explain)?

**How would you say your values, beliefs, and assumptions have changed over time?**

- How did you define abuse? How has that changed?
- What goals/dreams did you have prior to entering the relationship? How did they change? What are they now? How did the relationship affect these goals?
  - Do you think these goals can be met with your current partner?
- Did you have a boundary for violence within the relationship and did this boundary change?
- Would you say that you had a well defined value-system prior to entering the relationship? (Do you know what you believe about most things or do you feel like you are still trying to solidify those beliefs)
- How did your family members or community members who were aware of the abuse react?
  - Has your relationship with these people changed since the abuse?
  - How did the reactions of family members or community members affect you?

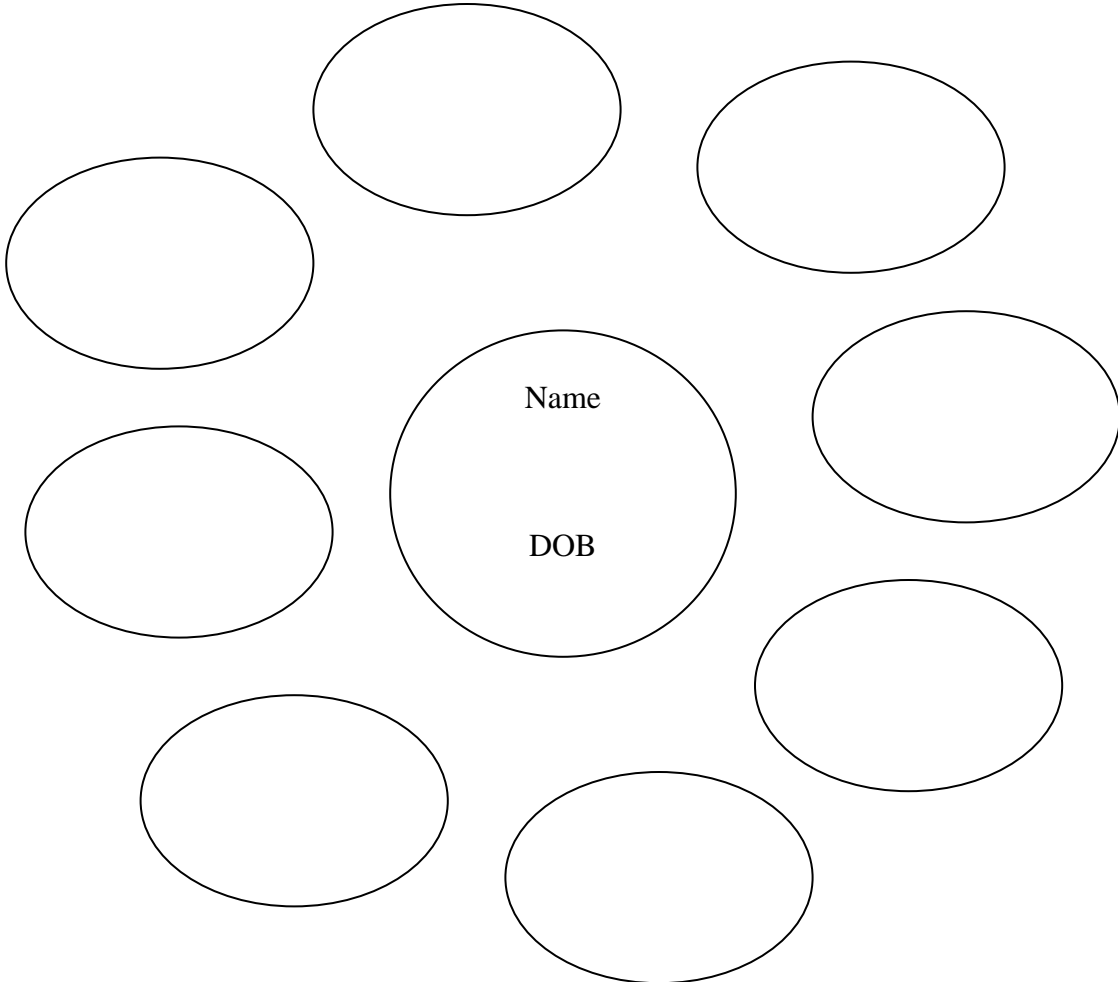
## Appendix D

### Ecomap Form





**Ecomap Form**


**Participants:** \_\_\_\_\_




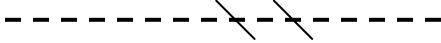
**Describing Relationships**

**Very Close**      

**Good**            

**Distant**        

**Conflicted**     

**No Relationship**   

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C.

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

### Request for Determination of Non-Human Subject or Non-Research

*Federal regulations and OSU policy require IRB review of all research involving human subjects. Some categories of research are difficult to discern as to whether they qualify as human subject research. Therefore, the IRB has established policies and procedures to assist in this determination.*

**1. Principal Investigator Information**

First Name: Julianna	Middle Initial: E.	Last Name: Buller
Department/Division: HDFFS		College: HES
Campus Address: 233 HES		Zip+4: 74078-6122
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<b>Complete if PI does not have campus address:</b>		
Address:		City:
State:	Zip:	Phone: (405) 880-6508

**2. Faculty Advisor (complete if PI is a student, resident, or fellow)  NA**

Faculty Advisor's name: Matthew W. Brosi, Ph.D.	Title: Assistant Professor
Department/Division: HDFFS	College: HES
Campus Address: 233 HES	Zip+4: 74078-6122
Campus Phone: 744-3633	Fax: 744-2800      Email: matt.brosi@okstate.edu

**3. Study Information:**

A. Title  
THE IMPACT OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE ON PARTICIPATION IN A VIOLENT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

B. Give a brief summary of the project. (See instructions for guidance)

Research questions:

How do women relate conflict management style in their families of origin to their experiences of violence in intimate couple relationships?

How do a woman's family of origin experiences, her own cognitive and emotional processes, and her personal conflict management style relate to her interactions within an intimate couple relationship?

Brief description of methodology:

I plan to analyze existing transcripts from an IRB-approved study using grounded theory methodology of open, axial, and selective coding in order to answer the research questions listed.

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board  
**Request for Determination of Non-Human Subject or Non-Research**

C. Describe the subject population/type of data/specimens to be studied. (See instructions for guidance)

The sample included females who were or had previously been shelter-dwellers. The sample size was 33 and included women who endured—by their own definition—abuse from a male intimate partner for any length of time. All adult ages, marital statuses, socioeconomic statuses, and ethnicities were accepted.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Directors of shelters within driving area from Stillwater, OK, were contacted, and flyers describing the study were distributed. Directors of shelters received information to help them understand the study and were contacted directly by phone to build rapport for the study. Directors were asked to hang flyers in visible areas so that shelter clients could obtain contact information to directly reach researchers. After women responded to flyers, participants were contacted to schedule appointments, which took place in mutually agreeable public places with confidential areas available (i.e., a meeting room in a public library or an open office at the shelter's business site).

Confidentiality will be maintained by assigning participants numbers and keeping confidentiality forms (which include identifying information) separate and in a locked file cabinet. Researcher for this study does not have access to identifying information about participants.

4. Determination of "Research".

45 CFR 46.102(d): *Research* means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Activities which meet this definition constitute research for purposes of this policy whether or not they are conducted or supported under a program which is considered research for other purposes.

One of the following must be "no" to qualify as "non-research":

- A. Will the data/specimen(s) be obtained in a systematic manner?  
 No  Yes
- B. Will the intent of the data/specimen collection be for the purpose of contributing to generalizable knowledge (the results (or conclusions) of the activity are intended to be extended beyond a single individual or an internal program, e.g., publications or presentations)?  
 No  Yes

5. Determination of "Human Subject".

45 CFR 46.102(f): *Human subject* means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains: (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual or (2) identifiable private information. Intervention includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (for example venipuncture) and manipulations of the subject or the subject's environment that are performed for research purposes. Interaction includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject. Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects.

- A. Does the research involve obtaining information about living individuals?  
 No  Yes  
If no, then research does not involve human subjects, no other information is required.  
If yes, proceed to the following questions.

All of the following must be "no" to qualify as "non-human subject":

- B. Does the study involve intervention or interaction with a "human subject"?  
 No  Yes

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board  
**Request for Determination of Non-Human Subject or Non-Research**

- C. Does the study involve access to identifiable private information?  
 No  Yes
- D. Are data/specimens received by the Investigator with identifiable private information?  
 No  Yes
- E. Are the data/specimen(s) coded such that a link exists that could allow the data/specimen(s) to be re-identified?  
 No  Yes  
If "Yes," is there a written agreement that prohibits the PI and his/her staff access to the link?  
 No  Yes

**6. Signatures**

Signature of PI Juliana Buller Date 11-6-08

Signature of Faculty Advisor Mark W. B... Date 11-6-08  
(If PI is a student)

- Based on the information provided, the OSU-Stillwater IRB has determined that this project **does not** qualify as human subject research as defined in 45 CFR 46.102(d) and (f) and **is not subject to oversight by the OSU IRB.**
- Based on the information provided, the OSU-Stillwater IRB has determined that this research **does** qualify as human subject research and **submission of an application for review by the IRB is required.**

Shelia H. Kennison  
Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair

11/13/08  
Date

VITA

Julianna E. Buller

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: THE IMPACT OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT  
STYLE ON PARTICIPATION IN A VIOLENT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December 2008.

Experience: Research Assistant, August 2006-December 2008; Teaching Assistant, August 2008-December 2008; Graduate Assistant for Upward Bound High School Program, November 2006-May 2007; OKAMFT Student and New Professionals Board Member, January 2008-Present; Human Environmental Sciences Recruitment and Retention Committee Member, Spring 2007-Fall 2008; Graduate and Professional Student Government Association, Fall 2006

Professional Memberships: American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, National Council on Family Relations, Oklahoma Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (OKAMFT)

Name: Julianna E. Buller

Date of Degree: December 2008

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE IMPACT OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT  
STYLE ON PARTICIPATION IN A VIOLENT INTIMATE  
RELATIONSHIP

Pages in Study: 70

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Scope and Method of Study: Qualitative study using modified grounded theory  
methodology to analyze transcripts of interviews with human subjects.

Findings and Conclusions: Anxiety plays a role in the complex process of  
intergenerational transmission as related to a woman's participation in a violent  
intimate partner relationship. Next, social support in shelters allows emotional  
space for the development of greater differentiation and formation of a strong  
sense of self. Finally, women have conflict management processes that contribute  
to a cycle of interaction in any couple relationship, including those intimate  
relationships that are violent.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Matthew W. Brosi

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