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Self-Esteem and Battered Women: Do Violence Shelters Help?

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence happens to 1 in 4 women in the US, and can be associated with deficits in emotional, social, physical and mental health. This study targets women who participated in a long-stay program at a battered women's shelter in a large Midwestern city. This was a retrospective analysis using a sample of 190 abused women who completed the Index of Self Esteem (ISE) to measure levels of self-esteem upon entering and exiting the program. Demographic data of the women was also considered in relation to self-esteem levels. Scores of the entering and exiting ISE forms were evaluated to see how effective shelter stays are in improving self-esteem in female victims of domestic violence. Human Subjects approval was given through the IRB to perform this study. ISE scores showed significant improvement during the women's stays in the shelter ($M = 61$ days). Women also reported financial, housing and emotional accomplishments during their stay in the shelter. This study suggests that shelter stays can improve women's self-esteem and provide a foundation for further research.

Self-Esteem and Battered Women: Do Violence Shelters Help?

Intimate partner violence is an under recognized problem in our society that is misjudged and often overlooked. A substantial amount of research has been performed that discusses the effect that violence has on women, not only physically--but mentally and emotionally. Violence in women has been linked to chronic health, emotional and social complications, one of which includes low self-esteem. According to a study done by Papadakaki, Tzamalouka, Chatzifotiou, and Chilaeotakis (2009) low self-esteem can cause women to doubt themselves, which can promote maintaining relations with the abuser. In the U.S, it is estimated that every year, 1 to 4 million women are sexually, emotionally, or physically abused by their partner. The aim of domestic violence shelters is to provide therapy (individual and group), legal aid, housing assistance, and to enhance internal and external resources for battered women and their children (Macy, Giattina, Sangster, Crosby, & Montijo, 2009). High self-esteem may prevent a woman from experiencing long term depressive effects of abuse, which is identified as a lasting issue that often results from partner violence (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002).

There are around 1,500 domestic violence shelters in the United States. Domestic violence shelters and programs do provide positive outcomes for those who seek help, but there is little information known about the exact services that are provided and how these services specifically affect the women (Macy et al, 2009). This study was done to provide information on the efficacy of violence shelters in improving women's sense of well-being and self-esteem. The study was done through a long-term stay program and examined the levels of self-esteem in battered women upon entering and exiting the shelter.

Review of Literature

Shelters

A longer stay at a shelter was associated with an increased self-esteem and decreased external locus of control which is considered a dimension of empowerment (Itzhaky & Porat, 2005). Extended shelter stays could allow more time for women to gather their resources and get their lives back on track. This could allow more efficient planning and result in fewer women feeling a need to return to their abusers. By decreasing the external locus of control women feel less 'helpless' and better able to change their situation (Pakieser, Leneghan, & Mulleman, 1999). This is important in the lives of domestic violence victims because empowerment is a part of what helps women desire an escape and a better life.

One study found that the factors representing self-esteem in battered women were already high upon entering the shelter. It was suggested that some women may go through a process where they decided to take a step towards changing their situation before determining their need to go to a shelter (Itzhaky & Porat, 2005). After the three month mark for these same women, self-esteem scores improved slightly – but longer shelter stays were recommended for more effectiveness (Itzhaky & Porat, 2005).

Self-Esteem

There is a general agreement across studies and among researchers that self-esteem is inversely related to frequency and severity of physical and/or psychological abuse (Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2004). Low self-esteem can weaken a woman's tie to her community and therefore cause an even larger detriment in her confidence and ability to change her situation (Papadakaki et al, 2009). According to the research by Itzhaky and Porat (2005), women who leave their abusive partners are usually overwhelmed by feeling a lack of social support and

failure to recognize their own abilities. This eventually leads the women to return to the abusive environment for emotional/financial security (Itzhaky & Porat, 2005).

The theory of learned helplessness has also been used to explain the female role in violence victimization. Learned helplessness is a psychological state of being where previous experiences can cause disruptions in motivation, cognitive thinking, and emotions which can result in women being passive, depressed and having feelings of hopelessness (Peterson & Park, 1998). Simply, women will not escape a bad situation even when given the means and resources to do so.

Women have been historically socialized to depend upon relationships as a source of self-esteem. This is where violence plays a role in depleting self-esteem and therefore leaving the women feeling incapable and without resources. It is possible that once a woman's self-esteem lowers to a certain level, she will not feel able or confident enough to leave an abuser.

Interventions

McCann and Pearlman (1990) emphasize the effect of individual therapy with interventions focused on rebuilding cognitive schemata, empowerment and learning to select productive life options. To break the cycle of violence confidence needs to be strengthened and women need to feel able to function independently (Itzhaky & Porat, 2005).

A study conducted by Lynch and Graham-Bermann (2004) suggests that employment can be used to help define a woman's sense of self, and therefore improve self-esteem related to abuse. A relationship was found between the quality of a woman's work and her sense of self in the workplace and at home. This implies that having employment could be used as a resource for women to renew their esteem and decrease the sense of 'helplessness' to achieve an independent and well-functioning lifestyle away from the abuser. In the study done by Lynch

and Graham-Bermann (2004), being employed was positively associated with a woman's decision to leave her abuser.

Methods

This study was a same group pre-test, post-test design. This was an analysis of abused women who participated in a long term shelter stay and completed the appropriate forms (Index of Self Esteem) to measure self-esteem upon entering and exiting the program.

Sample

A total of 443 women had been sheltered during the past 10 years at this specific battered women's shelter. A sample of 190 women was utilized from the primary group based on the criteria that the women had taken part in the long term stay program and had completed both an entering and exiting Index of Self Esteem (ISE) form. The women who had participated in a long term shelter stay were used because of the assumption that a longer stay in the shelter can potentially lead to more changes in a woman's well-being and self-esteem. Time frames of the long shelter stay vary but all of the women were required to have been in the shelter for 2 weeks before they were eligible for the long term program. Scores of the admission and discharge ISE forms were evaluated to see how effective shelter stays are in improving self-esteem in female victims of domestic violence.

Instruments

The tools used were the Index of Self Esteem, created by Walter M. Hudson (1993), and demographics. The ISE is a 25 item questionnaire that uses a summated category-partition scale to measure the severity of self-esteem problems. Each question is scored using a number rating scale (1-7) using 1 as "none of the time" to 7 as "all of the time". The score can range from 0-100, with a score below 30 indicating no clinically significant problems with self-concept or

esteem and a score above 30 indicating a significant problem with self-esteem, possibly requiring intervention. Half of the statements are worded positively and half of them are worded negatively. Once the negative answers are reversed, the score is totaled and 25 is subtracted. The reliability of the ISE according to an analysis performed by Abel, Jones and Hudson (1984) determined a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .93.

Human Subjects Approval

Human subjects approval was obtained from the Social and Behavioral Sciences review board at The Ohio State University.

Data Analysis

Statistical software, PASW Statistics 18.0 was used for data analysis. The scores of the ISE were analyzed with paired t-tests. Descriptive statistics were used for the demographic variables.

Results

Demographic Data

The sample consisted of 190 women who had participated in the long-term shelter stay program and completed both an entering and exiting ISE form. The mean age of the women was 33.38 years ($SD=10.1$). Most of the women in the shelter identified as Caucasian (45.1%) (See Figure 1), and 69.5% of the women had one or more children. A majority of the women were single (50%). The most common sources of income were wages/salary (28.9%), and temporary assistance (12.6%), but 37.4% of women had no income at all. Concerning education, 28% of the women were said to be school drop-outs, but 15.3% of the sample's highest grade completed was high school or a GED and 29.9% had completed some form of higher education.

Characteristics of Abuse

The most prevalent relationship the abuser had with the woman was a boyfriend at 45.8%, with a spouse being the second most frequent at 29.5% (See Figure 2). The prevalence of abuse coinciding with drug use of the abuser was 22.6%, and 30.5% of the abuse was precipitated by the abuser's use of alcohol. Alcohol use among the women was 24.2%, drug use was 3.7%, and 6.8% used both drugs and alcohol. Out of the sample, 35% of the women stated that they were raped by their current abuser. The incidence of women experiencing emotional abuse was 25%, and 76% of the women claimed to have also experienced life threatening abuse which included descriptors of choking, suffocation, abuser threatening death, and assault with a gun/knife or body/fist.

Shelter Stay

The length of stay ranged from 12-152 days, and the mean length of stay was 60.8 days. For 78.9% of the women, this was their initial stay within this specific shelter system. Upon leaving the shelter 78% of the women felt there had been changes within themselves. Accomplishments within the shelter stay included financial (64%), housing (82.1%), and emotional (75.8%) achievements upon leaving. Of the 190 women in the shelter 90.5% or 172 completed a safety plan upon exiting the shelter. Only 1.6% of the women reported that they planned to return to the abuser upon exiting the shelter.

Self-Esteem/Index of Self-Esteem Scores

The mean entering ISE score was 40.6, and the mean exiting ISE score was 26.7, which shows a large improvement in self-esteem scores. The paired t-test result ($t=10.9$; $p < .01$) was significant. From the entering ISE scores 39.5% of the women stated that they felt they needed more self-confidence "most or all of the time". According to the exiting scores of the ISE, only

18.4% of the women felt they needed more self-confidence “most or all of the time” (See Table 2). As shown in Table 1, education levels in relation to the ISE entering and exit score outcome showed that among the sample education had no significant effect on how much self-esteem levels were improved.

In relation to the factor of emotional well-being, 24% of the sheltered women admitted previous suicide attempts. Upon entering the shelter, 54.7% of the women reported feeling hopeless or depressed. In regards to social support, 57% of the women had no close friends or relatives nearby. More than 64% of the women felt that life was out of their control.

Discussion

The objective of the study was to provide information regarding the efficacy of violence shelters in improving women’s sense of well-being and self-esteem. The results show that the specific shelter that has been evaluated had a program that did improve self-esteem. The study investigated the women’s potential increase in self-esteem after participating in a long-term stay program within a battered women’s shelter, and demographic variables were analyzed to determine a possible contribution to these self-esteem levels. The data confirmed that exiting self-esteem scores were significantly higher when compared with the scores that were gathered upon entry to the shelter. With a higher self-esteem we can assume that the women have a greater sense of self-empowerment. In the future this factor could contribute to self-support (employment, emotional health, resource gathering), and also deter the women from returning to the abuser/abusive environment upon exiting the shelter.

Many of the women (37.4%) entered the shelter with no income. Upon leaving 64.2% of the women stated “financial accomplishments”. This is promising, although it is unspecified specifically how women may have acquired an income that they were not receiving before entering the shelter. Having a financial support system is important in creating a sense of ability

in women to survive without the abuser. This is related in the learned helplessness theory which has been linked to women not leaving their abusers, because they were financially dependent on the abuser (Knous, 1990). According to the learned helplessness theory, due to stressful and aversive events that cause emotional, motivational, and cognitive deficits, problem solving skills are interrupted which can make battered women more susceptible to feeling unable to escape or control a situation. Of the women 64% confirmed that they felt life was out of their control. This is evidence that interventions within the shelter should contain a focus on reestablishing feelings of control and enhancing problem solving skills to reinforce positive outcomes for the women leaving the shelter.

Index of Self-Esteem

The Index of self-esteem was the only measure within the database that provided information about the women's self-esteem levels upon entering and exiting the shelter. A SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) was done to determine the readability of the ISE form and evaluate its efficacy in this population of women. The score of the SMOG test determines how many years of education a person may need to understand a written document based on the number of sentences and polysyllable words. The smog score was 6.94, so around 7 years of education (6th-7th grade) would be needed to best understand the ISE form's content and instructions. According to the levels of education among the sheltered women, this form is relatively appropriate for the average levels of education, but quality of schooling and the individual's own academic achievement were not available and could be determining factors in how well the ISE can be understood.

In the research, 24% of the women who had been admitted to the long-term stay program had previously attempted suicide. According to the Georgia Department of Human Resources

(1992) one out of four women who attempt suicide is battered. This is a possible indicator of the women's sense of self-worth, and shows that domestic/intimate partner violence has a strong relationship to how hopeless a woman can feel with not being able to escape her situation and sense of helplessness.

Limitations

Being a small sample from one specific shelter poses limitations for this study. All of the data gathered were subjective and specific to how each woman was experiencing the abuse and her feelings about leaving the abuser. A high percentage of the women (76%) stated that they had experienced life threatening abuse prior to entering the shelter. In any physically, and possibly verbally or emotionally, abusive situation a woman may feel as though she is unsafe and at risk for danger. Many situations could be interpreted as life threatening abuse although, when using the clinical definition of what 'life threatening' classifies, this would not be an appropriate category for identifying what the women had experienced. Women who have been abused and experienced a crisis situation may exacerbate feelings of negativity and helplessness initially. This may make feelings of worthlessness, depression, and loneliness greater in relation to the stress of leaving their homes, support persons, and possibly financial means.

Data for this research were obtained from over 10 years of records within the shelter. This is a large amount of time for changes in shelter policies and procedures and how the shelter staff intervened with women's self-esteem. We can speculate that over time the shelter gained more resources and knowledge about what they can offer their clients in terms of services for their children, housing, employment/finances, and safety. All of these factors could have contributed to a higher level of self-esteem in the women, and it would have gradually improved the women's scores on the ISE over time.

Another limitation is that the current study focuses on women who are participating in a long-term shelter stay program, but the stays are all of varying length from 12 to 150 days, and therefore completing the ISE form at very different points in time. This presents a difficulty in predicting what interventions and accomplishments were provided within the unpredictable length of stays. Women who were there for a shorter amount of time may be unable to gather resources and stability before leaving the program. Women who had over three months could have established jobs, housing, and support systems within that time, possibly skewing the results of the ISE to a higher score. Having a more consistent time frame for the length of stay could prevent this possible barrier in future shelter systems, and create a more uniform intervention system for the women to ensure all needs are met if possible. However, shelter stays are simply variable.

Descriptions of what interventions were performed within the shelter were unavailable in the data. This limits the amount of insight that can be made in discussing what the interventions were that helped the women gain self-esteem and obtain financial, emotional and employment accomplishments upon exiting the shelter. Having this information would have provided a better understanding as to how women gain better self-esteem and what lifestyle factors enhance it. Further research can be done to specifically identify this problem.

Further research would be beneficial by continuing data collection on what specific interventions most improve self-esteem in the shelter setting. By discovering what interventions are most effective we may better be able to target what will improve self-empowerment and self-efficacy once the women leave the shelter. One important goal of a shelter stay is to give the women time and resources to escape and independently function without the abuser.

According to the sample 37.4% of the sheltered women entered the program with no income. One limitation to this finding is that most women who leave their partners and go to shelters often have to quit their jobs for their own safety and the safety of the shelter (Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2004). An option to prevent this from happening could be keeping communication open between the woman and her employer during her time of leave so that she will have employment after her stay at the shelter, although this could pose risk for the shelter and the woman by increasing the number of people who know of possible places the woman is staying.

Conclusion

Results suggest domestic violence shelters and programs do have positive outcomes for those who seek help, but there is little information known about the exact services that are provided and how these services specifically affect the women. Although little is known about the specific interventions, we would like to know more about how these interventions affect the mental health outcomes on women exiting the shelter, which can therefore affect social and environmental life aspects as well. This study provides a foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of other battered women's shelters with regard to improvement in self-esteem and suggests for many opportunities for future research.

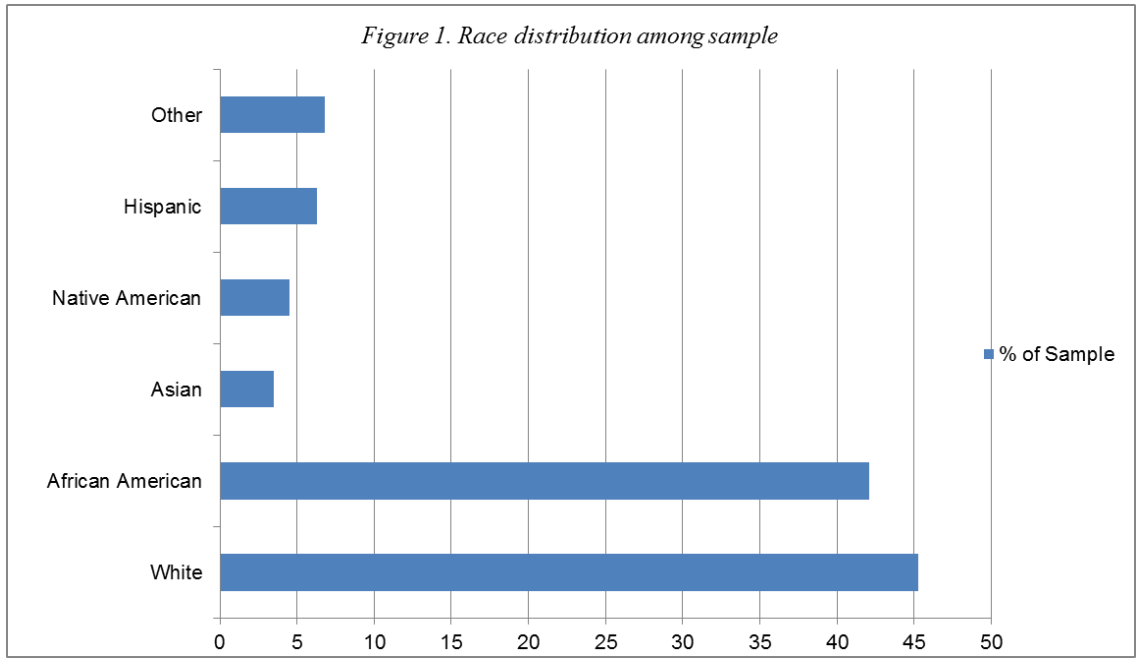


Figure 2
Abuser's Relation to the Client

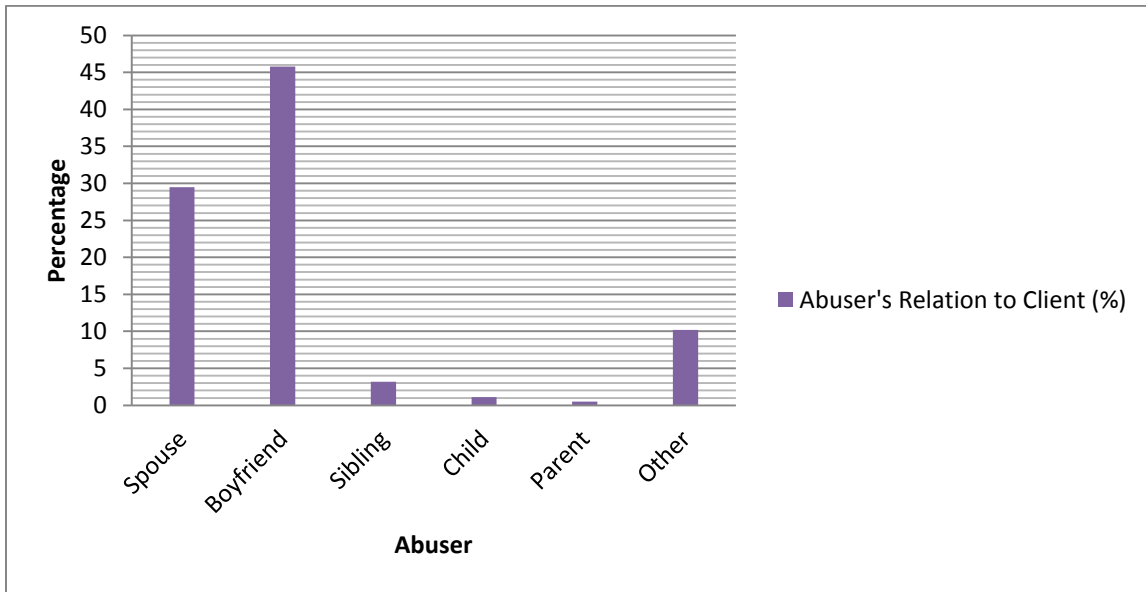


Table 1

Education & Mean ISE Entering/Exiting Scores

Education level	(%) of sample	Entering mean ISE score	Exiting mean ISE score
1 st -5 th grade	2.5	46.8	22.4
6 th -8 th grade	1.6	47.0	38.7
9 th -12 th grade	28.4	50.4	29.1
Some College/Trade School	15.2	52.5	32.0
2 year associates degree	4.2	32.3	16.6
4 year bachelor's degree	4.2	48.0	34.0
Graduate degree	2.1	46.0	37.3
Missing Education Data	41.6	35.0	25.3

Table 2

ISE Entering and Exiting Question: "I feel I need more self-confidence"

Response	Entering ISE (%)	Exiting ISE (%)
Rarely or none of the time	17.9	16.8
A little of the time	14.2	22.6
Some of the time	19.5	26.8
A good part of the time	18.9	15.3
Most or all of the time	39.5	18.4

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