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A Hermeneutic Study: The Impacts of the Harm Reduction Approach on Women Living In Abusive Relationships

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CIRTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to "Jenna," "Beth," and "Anne" who had the courage and trust to tell their stories. In allowing me to participate in this area of their lives, I was afforded the opportunity to bare witness to their narratives of living with abusive partners. Through these narratives, evidence of strength and hope were revealed in each woman's courageous voice.

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACTS OF THE HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

ON

WOMEN LIVING IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS:

A HERMENEUTIC STUDY

Darla Segelstrom

April 30, 2001

Despite the number of services available to battered women, few focus on working with those who remain in the abusive relationships. The Harm Reduction approach is one geared towards working with women who have not yet made the decision to leave their abusive partner. This hermeneutic, interpretive study of women's narratives revealed that the harm reduction approach provided non-judgmental support, which was conducive to increasing women's overall awareness of themselves, their situation, and their options. It is recommended that social workers and other human service agencies recognize the complexity, individuality and strength in each battered woman they encounter, facilitate a non-judgmental approach in working with them, and that battered women's experience and choice is validated rather than stigmatized or pathologized for the problem.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the problem of women who live in abusive relationships and how the harm reduction approach can be applied to implement support and increase safety. The background of the problem of domestic violence will be explored, the problem will be stated, and the purpose as well as significance of this research study will be established. The context of the researcher's interest in the problem will be located historically, biologically and socially in order to make as transparent as possible the lens through which this study was viewed.

Background of the Problem

According to Eisikovits, Peled, Enosh, & Winstok (2000), 50-60% of women return to their abuser following discharge from a battered woman's shelter. These women are often characterized by society as weak, incompetent, and lacking the skills, which further cause them victimization. In addition, they are classified as women who "choose" to stay in the abusive relationship. In reality, they are often constrained by internal (self-blame) or external (situational and socio-cultural) constraints. According to the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (2000), 75% of all deaths occur to abused women after they have left their violent partner. Wilson & Daily (1993) support that statistic and add that women who are in the process of leaving or have left their abuser are more than twice as likely to become victims of homicide than women who stay with their abusive partner. Davidson (2000) estimates that women leave and return to their abuser 7 to 9 times before permanently leaving or becoming a homicide statistic.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, domestic violence has been treated as a personal or private problem (Owens-Manley, 1999). Although efforts have been made over the past several decades at increasing services to women who wish to leave their abuser, few services are available for women who have not yet made the decision to leave. While many theoretical approaches are focused solely on the victim leaving her abuser, few work with women while they continue to remain in the relationship. As women attempt and re-attempt to leave their abuser, the blame is further placed on the victim by the police, hospital staff, and shelter workers, for having returned in the first place. When a woman finally emerges from the victimization of her batterer and re-victimization by the "helping system," she is still not considered to be safe (Wood & Middleman,1992). She is not safe from her abuser; she is most likely not safe economically or psychologically. Although she has left the abuse, the feelings of worthlessness, self-blame, and deserving of years of enduring abuse continue (Woods at el., 1992). While this outcome is not the exception but rather the norm, it is imperative that a new approach be used in working with women who remain in abusive relationships. This is not only to increase safety in her own environment, but also her safety when she finally makes the decision to leave her abuser.

Purpose and significance of the Research Study

In this study, the researcher will strive to understand how the harm reduction approach impacts the experience of women living in abusive relationships. The researcher will identify common themes and shared meanings from the perspective of abused women who remain with their abusive partners. This study will attempt to

decipher the most helpful and least helpful aspects of the harm reduction approach. The goal of this research study will be to describe the experience of women and to increase our understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon rather than to propose theoretical knowledge or derive universal principle.

Research Question

The research question is, "How does the harm reduction approach impact women living in abusive relationships?" The first question that was asked of each participant was, "Tell me how the services provided by this program have impacted your experience of living with an abusive partner." The researcher utilized a number of prompts during the interview. Refer to Appendix A for complete list.

The Researcher's Location

This qualitative research study utilized a research methodology called *hermeneutics*, based upon the work of German Philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927-1962). Heidegger used the hermeneutic interpretative approach to ask the question of what kinds of beings are we as human beings and how we know what we know. Heidegger's philosophy concluded that because human beings live in common worlds, we all share common meaning, common experiences and common practices. As a result of these commonalties, our past understandings and experiences influence how we make interpretations about the world around us.

Gadamer, a pupil of Heidegger, expanded Heidegger's philosophy by including the past history of the researcher as well as the participant, and defined interpretation as an interaction between a text that was historically produced, the text of linguists of the participant that was influenced by experience and history, and the history produced by the

reader themselves (Allen, 1995). In following the philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer, it is therefore significant for the reader to understand where the researcher-interpreter was located historically, biologically and socially relative to the culture of women who remain with abusive partners.

This research study was undertaken by a Caucasian, single, 34-year-old female who was raised in a suburban intact family. Throughout my formative years, I was highly influenced by the women who surrounded me and soon came to develop an interest in issues relating to the oppression of women. Consequently, domestic violence became of particular interest and is a subject that I have followed and worked in for many years, both with abusers and those who have been abused. I have also observed throughout the years, the differences in services available to women leaving their abuser versus services to women who remain in the abusive relationship. Because of these experiences, I have developed an a understanding for women who remain in abusive relationships, both on a professional and personal level. In addition, I am currently employed in a social service setting which utilizes the harm reduction approach with chronic chemical abusers. In my experience in working with these individuals, I have had the privilege of witnessing a great deal of success; success where other "helping systems," and even the clients themselves thought not possible.

My experience in utilizing the harm reduction approach and interest in working with abused women sets the stage for the research study that I conducted for this paper. From the literature reviewed and the women I observed in my study, it appears that their experience of living with an abusive partner contains similar meaning and understanding to those women I have observed in the past. This research study was undertaken in hopes

that those who read this interpretation of the stories told by the 3 women who participated in this project, would gain a deeper understanding of their shared meanings and common themes. It is also my intention to encourage further research on this topic and to advocate that more non-judgmental services be expanded to women who remain in abusive relationships.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the background of women who are living with an abusive partner, the researcher's interest in the lived experience of these women and how the harm reduction approach impacts this experience. This chapter also reviewed the purpose and significance of this research study, the research question and a list of prompts. In Chapter 2, the literature applicable to domestic violence, women who remain in abusive relationships, and the harm reduction approach will all be reviewed. Chapter 3 will present the conceptual framework upon which this research study was based. In Chapter 4, the methodology utilized will be explained. In Chapter 5, the findings of this study will be presented; literature and theoretical connections will be discussed in how theory relates to these findings. In Chapter 6, the contributions of this study, implications for social work practice, and future research will be examined.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This literature review will briefly review the history of both domestic violence and the harm reduction approach. Domestic abuse and why women stay, traditional and non-traditional approaches used in working with women in abusive relationships. The harm reduction approach used in working with women who are not ready to permanently leave their abusive partner is the non-traditional approach.

Definition of Terms

In order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon and how the harm reduction approach impacts the experience of women living in abusive relationship, it is essential to define the terminology that is used in the literature.

Domestic Abuse

For the purpose of this literature, domestic abuse is defined as any physical, verbal, sexual, and/or emotional assault on a woman by her male partner or husband.

The Harm Reduction Approach

Throughout the literature, the term "harm reduction" is used interchangeably with "harm minimization," "damage limitation," and "risk reduction" (Tsue, 2000). For the purpose of clarity, the term "harm reduction approach" will be used throughout this paper. The harm reduction approach utilizes a moderation method to reduce risks and potential harms associated with risks and/or risk taking behavior. This approach employs a set of strategies that increase self-esteem and self-determination through empowerment. It is designed to "meet the client where they are at" and understands that clients must take

the lead in the process of change. This is accomplished by the client setting small, individualized goals, reduced social isolation, on-going education, and a non-judgmental approach by the worker.

History of Domestic Abuse

Peterson (1992) suggests that although domestic abuse has an extended history, only a few historians have thoroughly studied it. He continues to add that the relationship between male dominance and male violence is complex as well as favorable. Peterson (1992) states that there seems to be an apparent fluctuation of domestic assaults over the span of history. "Wife beaters were more restrained in their violence in the 1890s than they were in the 1970s, and the proportion of men who beat their wives may have also been lower in the late 19th century than later"(p. 100). This apparent shift in domestic assaults most likely occurred do to the decline of control a man had over his wife, marriage, and a woman's ability to obtain a divorce, which ultimately changed a man's view of responsibility towards women (Peterson, 1992). Court records also support this shift in domestic assaults, which confirms that violent husbands battered less readily in the late 19th century than in the late 20th century (Peterson, 1992). Although a decrease in domestic reports at any given time may be a result of increased power and respect for women, a more likely explanation of this shift could also be caused by the lack of reporting done by women who were abused. Lack of enforcement for domestic assaults during the 19th century is also an explanation to consider. Since men held the power during this era, domestic assaults were not needed as a source of control (Peterson 1992).

Dating back to the biblical era, women have been viewed and classified as weak, emotional, difficult, vulnerable, and unstable (Weitzman, 2000). The bible confirms this

view by implying that women are the subordinate gender and stating that Eve was created from man and for man. This began the limited choice that women had over the years. A wife, mother, priestess, prostitute, or a mistress were virtually the only career options for women up until World War ll (Weitzman, 2000). Although the first accounts of domestic abuse is unknown, Weitzman (2000) states that domestic abuse acts, which often formulated into customs, can be traced back to Rome, where they continued on into the 20th century.

In 753 B.C., soon after Rome was founded, laws were incorporated that enacted the man to be the head of the household and the sole authority over the family. This custom granted the male figure what was known as the *patria potestas,* which protected his rights, power and authority over his wife (Weitzman, 2000). This custom ensured that women were to remain a legal possession of their husband, giving them no legal rights (Okun, 1986). This included a man's legal right to sell his wife and children, put them into slavery and even order them to death at his command (Hecker, 1914). Weitzman (2000) confirms that these legal rights allowed the male figure the right to discipline his wife physically for virtually any or no offense. In 202 B.C., the Punic Wars improved the social conditions for women. Widows could now own property, women had the right to sue their husbands for financial compensation or an unjustified beating, and less severe laws were enacted against women committing adultery (Weitzman, 2000). Weitzman continues to state that by the 4th century, excessive violence by either the husband or the wife were now grounds for divorce. In the review of this literature, no documentation was reviewed as to whether or how often this law was ever enforced. Although improvements were made in the lives of women during this time, according to

Roman law, Okun (1986) states that Christianity was making opposite progress through reinforced patriarchal authority.

For the next 11 centuries, women held the status of subordinate. It was during this time that women could be legally burned at the stake for prostitution, adultery, miscarriage, or for talking back to a priest. In mid-evil Europe, women were often locked in chastity belts to ensure fidelity (Roy, 1977). Although the chivalry code advised men to honor and serve women during the Mid-Evil Times, women were often viewed as objects to be admired, traded, and sold for such reasons as peace offerings or to increase wealth. Okun (1986) states that it was often common at this time for a knight of lower status to rape a noble virgin to gain marriage above his rank. During the coming of the Renaissance, men were urged to become "more compassionate to women, to treat them as they would their hens and pigs" (Okun, 1986, p. 3). Although there are hints of improvement made for the rights of women throughout the centuries, the regressions appears to far outweigh the progress made. This continued during the 17th century.

The 17th century started the golden age of the rod, which deemed that a man could legally use a rod on his wife or children at his discretion (Weitzman, 2000). In 1641, the first American reform against family violence was included in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, which declared that no assaults were permitted unless they were in self-defense. Although this law was enacted to protect women, family preservation always reigned over victims rights in the court of law (Pleck, 1987). In hopes to amend the no assault law, revisions were eventually constructed so that domestic assault could legally occur to women by their husbands, constructed very carefully by men of the court, with very specific guidelines. According to Okun (1986), the common phrase of today, "rule

of thumb," was originated from a law stating that you could only beat your wife with an object as long as the circumference of the object was less than that of the man's right thumb. In 1864, the North Carolina court overturned the "finger stitch rule," in which a husband could abuse his wife and not be criminally prosecuted as long as her injuries did not require any stitches (Pleck, 1987). These laws remained in place for the next several decades.

In 1874, the topic of human cruelty first sparked the attention of the public. It was during this year that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was founded. This focus stemmed from a similar organization that focused on the prevention of cruelty towards animals. Although there was never an organization formed that drew attention towards spousal abuse, this attention towards the maltreatment of children spurred some attention towards the maltreatment of women (Weitzman, 2000). In 1882, Maryland became the first state to pass a law which banished brutal wife beating. Husbands, who actually were convicted of this offense, received the sentence of a public whipping. Several other states followed this lead, and in 1894, "the Brooklyn SPCC defined the cruelty to wives as the infliction of needless and wrongful physical pain, endangerment of the life or limb, and the neglect of food, shelter, and well being" (Weitzman, 2000, p. 41). For the most part of history, laws around domestic assault were few, and the actual enforcement of them, were even less. Despite the effort at passing laws, for the most part, policies which outlined domestic violence were viewed as a violation of civil liberties and a family problem that should be ignored so that the parties involved could forgive and forget (Dutton, 1988).

Post World War ll, the problems of domestic abuse was once again addressed. The focus was on woman being the problem. This view continued to be reinforced by the courts, social workers, and therapists who were focused on making the woman a better wife, a better mother, a better cook, and a better housewife (Pleck, 1987). Pleck continues to add that women involved in abusive relationships during this era were viewed as in need of repair; and women were most likely never informed that abuse was wrong. The field of psychology also reinforced the attitudes of blaming the victim. According to Hofeller (1982), psychoanalysis adopted the Freudian belief that women were suffering from an unresolved oedipal quandary that directly impacted a woman's character. A student of Freud, Helen Deutsch, expanded this concept by maintaining that women desired to be raped or impregnated by their fathers, as women were incensed by their lack of having a penis. Hofeller (1982) states that this concept thus became the psychiatric explanation for the reason that women stay with their abusers; women secretly enjoyed the overall abuse and pain that they endured.

The 1950s continued to reinforce the submission of women with the coming of the happy homemaker. This "new woman" bombarded every television show, magazine cover as well as the entire advertising industry. According to Weitzman (2000), the number of domestic assaults that were reported during this era took a dramatic decrease. Weitzman (2000) continues to add that this was most likely due to the shame that women felt during this era of not being able to contend with the pressures of being the perfect wife, mom, and homemaker. It would be too humiliating for a woman to admit that her home was not the typical Beaver Cleaver type of residence.

The problem of domestic violence finally became recognized and was given some attention with the coming of the Vietnam War, feminist rights, and civil rights of the 1960s and 70s (Weitzman, 2000). In 1972, the first rape crisis hotline was opened in Berkeley, California which became a model in addressing domestic abuse. In 1973, the National Organization of Women (NOW) established its first task force on abuse, which focused on reform policy, support groups for women, and legal aid to battered women. In 1974, the first American safe house for abused women was opened in St. Paul, Minnesota (Weitzman, 2000). It was not until the mid 1970s that a law was finally passed that made marital rape a real and prosecutable crime (Okun, 1986). Weitzman (2000) states that in 1976, MS magazine also had a direct impact in making the public aware of domestic assault by titling their cover article Women Next Door, which focused on the fact that wife battering occurs in every neighborhood throughout the country. In 1979, in her book titled The Battered Woman, Lenore Walker of the Domestic Violence Institute in Colorado introduced the concept of the cycle of violence, which became a main principle in theories about domestic abuse (Weitzman, 2000). Although this literature only covers a brief overlay on the complete history of domestic violence, the wider extensive history is worth noting.

History of the Harm-Reduction Model

According to Fromberg (1995), the first acclaimed harm reduction movement started in 1990, at *the First International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm in Liverpool.* Prior to this time, the harm reduction approach was used in the late 1960s and early 1970s in London and in the Netherlands in the 1980s. Each program focused on safe drug use techniques in reducing the spread of Hepatitis B and the HIV

virus (Tsui, 2000); its original intent and continuing priority tended to be centered on reducing harm among active drug users.

Single (1995) defines harm reduction as the measures aimed at reducing the harm associated with drug use without requiring a reduction in consumption. "Some people are just not ready for abstinence....it is vital that we work with them in order to reduce harm both on a individual and a societal level (Thomas, 2001). Some examples of the harm reduction approach include needle exchange programs to reduce the spread of AIDS, methadone maintenance with heroine users, and a user-friendly system for educational purposes. The latter is an example, which educates drug users on safer drug use, proper injection techniques and alternative ways of taking drugs (Springer, 1991).

The harm reduction approach contains three key aspects: 1) The users decision to use drugs is accepted as fact; 2) the user is treated with dignity and respect at all times, while not ignoring the users responsibility for his or her behavior; and 3) the user is viewed as having long term goals of intervention, which will ultimately reduce risky behaviors (Single, 1995).

Although the harm reduction approach does include abstinence as an alternative, it does not begin with this type of approach such as Alcoholic Anonymous or traditional treatment programs. "There are a lot of social, economic, and political issues that go beyond the disease model" (Thomas, 2001). The harm reduction approach involves prioritizing goals, which focus on clients strengths to reduce immediate harms to the client themselves and society as a whole (Tsui, 2000). Thomas (2001) supports this approach by stating that "increasing self esteem by identifying the small successes in life,

reducing the stigma around the behavior and creating a safe environment so that clients will return for services and support are all key components to reducing harm."

Domestic Violence

The American Medical Association estimates that over 4 million women are victims of severe assaults by husbands or partners each year, and about 1 in every 4 woman is likely to be abused by her partner in a lifetime (Glazer, 1993). Exceeding childbirth, automobile accidents, and all other emergencies combined, domestic assaults are the most common reason for a women to enter a hospital's emergency room (Mills, 1996). Wilson et al. (1993) state that women who are in the process of leaving or have left their abusive spouse, are more than twice as likely to be victims of homicide than women who stay with their abusive partners. This statistic, at various times, has reached as high as 75% of all homicides occurring after the battered woman has left her abusive partner (Wilson et al., 1993). According to the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (2000), women leave and return to their abusive partner 7 to 9 times before permanently leaving or becoming a homicide statistic. With facts like these, it is imperative that a new approach be used in working with women to stay safe in their environments before and after making the decision to permanently leave.

Why Women Stay in Abusive Relationship

According to Hattendorf & Tollerud (1997), women stay in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons. The psychological reluctance that women face in trying to separate from their abusive partner is known as traumatic bonding. This bonding often stems from an imbalance of power in the relationship and the intermittent negative reinforcement of battering. The potential for this bonding increases when a woman has

had past victimization of abuse, often in her childhood (Hattendorf & Tollerud, 1997). The cycle of violence, tension building, acute battering, and finally the honeymoon stage, only reinforces this bonding. It is in this cycle of violence that women identify with their partner in the honeymoon stage and deny that he is the same man that abused her during the battering stage (Hattendor et al., 1997). In addition to the psychological factors of staying, women remain or return to abusive relationships for very concrete and realistic reasons.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (1996), women remain in abusive relationships due to: 1) lack of financial resources (having to make a choice between being battered or being homeless); 2) fear of losing their children (threats from their partner to take their children away); 3) fear of being killed by their partner; 4) fear of being alone; 5) hope and belief that their abusive partner will change; 6) feelings of responsibility for a failed marriage; and finally, 7) not wanting to leave a man that they truly love.

Traditional approaches used in working with abused women have acknowledged these reasons for staying, although they have generally ignored them as legitimate and provided little service to women who remain in an abusive relationship (Weingour, 1996). Eisikovits, Buchbinder, and Mor (1998) also confirm this traditional approach as being an either/or solution to a complex problem. They continue to add that this traditional solution continues to pathologize women who have not yet made the decision to leave, for whatever reasons that may be.

Effective and Ineffective Approaches Used with Battered Women

Traditionally society as well as the legal system, has tolerated domestic assaults on females rather than treating them as a crime against women (Hattendorf et al., 1997). Women who are not yet ready to leave their abusive partner are often blamed or viewed as deserving of the abuse for "choosing to stay" (Eisikovits et al., 2000). This traditional approach often ignores her ability to assess her own situation and invalidates what little power she may have left in her own life. Although traditional intervention measures such as shelters, advocacy programs, counseling centers, and legal advocacy are vital in assisting women, they are generally aimed at women who have decided to permanently leave the relationship. Thus, these measures may ignore the number of women who are not yet ready to leave (Eisikovits et al., 1997).

A study conducted by Gordon (1996), examines what community services and/or theoretical approaches are considered to be useful or effective, versus least helpful or those that cause conflict in working with women involved in abusive relationships. The selection of participants consisted of 137 women who identified themselves as being abused (battered control group) and a control group of a second set of 137 women for comparison (non-battered control group). The method for obtaining the information from the women in the study consisted of self-report surveys and in-depth interviews. Their personal strategies and help sources, advice given by abused women based on their own experience, the women's opinions of what worked best for decreasing violence, and empirical correlates of battering cessation were all examined. The results of this study concluded that theoretical approaches, which focused on listening to women and believing their stories, are the most helpful techniques used in working with abused

women. Gordon (1991) continues to add that hearing what women are saying and validating their feelings provides a conducive environment for the next stage of therapy, building on client's strengths and increasing self-esteem. The least effective method of working with abused women was in contacting the police. The women explained that the police would often question their stories, criticize the women for staying in the relationship, and/or give few referrals to other agencies that would assist them. A second area of concern in contacting the police was described as an increase in violence by their abuser following a police visit. In conclusion, this study showed that the most frequently contacted services were not necessarily the most useful or effective.

A second study conducted by Davis, Hagen and Early (1994), looked at services and theoretical approaches that adequately served women involved in abusive relationships. This study was conducted on a state-by-state basis, which looked at funding, history, structure, availability of services to abused women and gaps in services among 52 coalitions and 50 state agencies. This method of obtaining the information was through a series of surveys, which included open-and closed-ended questions, rankings, and Likert-type scales. Quantitative data analysis was conducted to look at the effectiveness of services to battered women. Overall, state agencies and coalitions rated their states as doing very well at providing services to abused women. Providing shelter services to women living in rural areas, services to non-sheltered abused women, and in shelter services for abused women in general, were viewed as inadequate among both groups (Davis et al., 1994).

In conjunction with the findings of these studies, the Harm-Reduction approach applies methods that are viewed as being the most useful and/or effective. These are

services directed to women who are not in shelter and with women who have no shelter options.

The Harm Reduction Approach with Battered Women

When individuals are involved in risk situations, they generally do not make changes overnight. For many, this change takes a great deal of time, contemplation, trials, failures, and re-attempts before they are successful. Interwoven within the harm reduction approach are Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross's Transtheoretical stages of change (1990). The five stages of change that are identified are: 1) Precontemplative: the battered woman has not yet begun to consider leaving; 2) Contemplative: the battered woman has begun to consider change but ambivalence is high; 3) Determination: the balance of ambivalence is leaning towards leaving her abuser; 4) Action: change is initiated; and finally, 5) Maintenance: the battered woman does not return to her abuser. This theoretical approach aims at reducing harm in battered women, regardless of the stage of change. According to Eiskovits et al. (2000), the first rule in working with abused women, no matter what stage they are in, is to ensure their safety.

Springer (1991) and Thomas (2000) list several strategies of the harm reduction approach in working with battered women. Saving lives, staying safe in their current living situation and reducing harm in their lives are viewed as priorities. Educating an abused woman on safety guidelines can reduce her risk of injury. Staying out of rooms where weapons could be accessed, writing up a safety plan, having a safe place to go if needed, knowing the phone numbers of trusted friends, obtaining copies of important documents, and planning an escape route out of the house, are vital in reducing harm.

A second strategy of the harm reduction approach allows a woman to set her own goals and agenda, even if she has not yet made the decision to leave her abuser. It is vital in working within this approach to work respectfully with battered women, to validate their feelings, and to accept their choices (Springer, 1991 and Thomas, 2000). Mills (1996) supports using a model that is flexible and individualized to each battered woman. "The conflicting loyalties experienced by most, if not all, battered women to themselves, their batterers, and their communities cry out for interventions that are more tolerant of the unpredictability generated by the trauma of intimate violence. Interpretations, advice, and remedies must respect the differences inherent in each battered woman's experience and treat the problem according to the survivor's shifting position, but also must recognize that true empowerment for battered women may itself be transitional and uncertain" (p. 262-263). According to Eisikovits (2000), "...the main goal of empowering social work practice in general, and with battered women in particular, is to allow clients control over their own lives and the ability to make decisions for themselves—that is, to provide them the conditions to balance rights and needs and thus make choices" (p. 14).

The harm reduction approach understands the need for women who are involved in an abusive relationship to feel some sense of control over their own lives. This approach promotes the use of her strengths and views the resilience that she has, not as difficult life experiences, but the ability to go on in spite of these experiences (Eisikovits, 2000).

Domestic Violence Treatment Alternatives

Although little research has been done in applying the harm reduction model to domestic violence, several anti-harm reduction strategies are prominent with the field of family violence. According to Davis (1987), in their commitment to preserve the family, family service agencies often encourage couples counseling as a means of treatment for domestic violence. Davis (1987) continues that this method of treatment is encouraged as the belief that abuse is caused by interactional family dynamics, history, dependence, fear of abandonment and lack of resources. While this may be true, men and women often view therapy differently. "My belief is that the woman sees therapy as something that will give her something. He sees it as a minus....I have a submissive wife who does everything for me, and if therapy is successful, then I will get less of what I had before" (Davis, 1997, p. 64). According to the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (2000), battered women who have attended couples counseling with their partner describe their experience as one of two outcomes: 1) the abusive partner wins over the support and confidence of the therapist who then begins to blame the woman for the problems that are occurring in the relationship; or 2) the woman's belief that it would be safe to disclose the abuse to the therapist, results in a battering by her abusive partner following the therapy session.

A second anti-harm reduction consideration for domestic violence is the pathology and stigma that are placed on women by help agents. According to Wells (1996), battered women often experience additional shame and embarrassment from outside help agencies. According to Goffman (1963), stigmatized individuals often feel uncertain about how others will identify or receive them. He continues to add, that when

individuals are stigmatized, they often feel self-conscious and calculating about the impressions they make on other when they seek help, unlike a non-stigmatized individual for utilizing the same services for reasons that are validated by the community. Pathologizing abused women as being helpless, afraid, stupid, emotionally unstable, or dependent only increases their chances of not seeking out support, calling the police when needed, and in ultimately remaining with their abuser since they believe they have no other option.

Gaps in the Literature

Although there are several gaps which could be addressed with this literature review, this researcher will only address mainly one, the experience of women who remain in abusive relationships and how the harm reduction approach impacts that experience. The theoretical approach known as harm reduction is fairly new in the United States and little research has been done in applying this approach to domestic abuse. Although it has been highly popular in reducing harm among drug abusers, it continues to spark much controversy as promoting drug use and enabling drug users. The harm reduction approach asserts that criminalizing a drug user and pathologizing women who are not yet ready to leave their abuser, will only encourage individuals to deny help when they need it.

With respect to domestic violence, there were very few studies available that discuss how it works, whether it works, and what are or may be the implications of such an approach to treat this particular population. In particular, no studies were found that utilized a Heidegger hermeneutic analysis to examine the experience of women who

remain in abusive relationships and are being supported with the harm reduction approach, the focus of this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of the strengths perspective, the empowerment approach, and the harm reduction model will be outlined in this chapter. While all three contain similar key concepts, by utilizing a client-focused and strengths based approach, the harm reduction model takes additional precautions in reducing the potential risks of women living in abusive relationships.

The harm reduction model is based on a moderation of use approach. This approach has been most notably used in the treatment of chemical abusers by disseminating disposable syringes, methadone maintenance programs and with prostitution, by dispersing and promoting the use of condoms. Rationale for applying these models to study the experience of women living in abusive relationships will be explored.

The Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective, a main component of the empowerment approach, places emphasis on the resilience and overall strengths of the client. Saleeby (1996) outlines several key aspects of the strengths perspective: 1) Empowerment: the ability to utilize resources and tools already accessible to clients; 2) Resilience: the on-going development of skills, insight, ability and knowledge, and finally; 3) Membership: encouraging clients to be members of a community, taking responsibility and adding value to the community in which they are connected. According to Early & GlenMaye (2000), the client is the leader in the process of change. The worker is viewed as a

collaborator to assist the client in defining the problem, determining the approach to use, and identify the desired outcome. Emphasis is placed on the strengths of the individual to serve as a stimulus for further growth. It also allows the client to define their own interaction with the environment, which allows them further control over their own problem solving (Payne, 1997). This view is supported by others (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kishardt, 1989) who found that focusing on the problems tends to stagnate growth, while the focus on attributes and strengths tends to promote and expand growth. Utilizing current client resources is also a key concept within this perspective. Building on current supports and resources will increase the client's capabilities in all areas of their lives (Weick et al., 1989). Koilpatrick and Holland (1999) add that this approach celebrates every accomplishment or change, no matter how small. Saleeby (1996) continues to add that this approach requires a chronicle of what clients can do and how they are able to do it, regardless of the size of achievement. In allowing the client's to define their own problems as well as solutions, increases the likelihood that some change will occur as client's feel a greater sense of control over the situation. They continue to add that within this approach, there is never one "right" way to view a solution to a problem; as exceptions to the problem is the main focus rather than the problem itself (Kilpatrick et al., 1999).

The Empowerment Approach

Empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take steps in improving their lives and overall situation (Gutierrez, 1990). According to Gutierrez, DeLois, and GlenMaye (1995), power can be defined in the ability to: 1) obtain what one needs; 2) have influence over a situation; and

3) influence the distribution of resources in a social system. The empowerment approach emerged in an attempt to address problems of unequal power, lack of service response, and to integrate a balance of power within society, particularly for women and other marginalized populations. The goal within this model is to redistribute the power to oppressed individuals, in order to reduce perpetual problems to society as a whole.

Therefore, the primary goal within this model is to assist battered women in gaining power over decisions, actions, and ultimately their own lives (Payne, 1997). When the re-distribution of power finds equilibrium, individuals who were once powerless begin to achieve a better self-concept, greater understanding in their abilities for independence, and ultimately, the control to make choices that promote their own growth (Gutierrez, et al., 1995).

Rose (1990) describes 3 principles of advocacy in empowerment practice: contextualization, empowerment and collectivity. 1) In contextualization the focus is on the client's view of what is occurring in his or her life. This principle views the client as the expert to their existence and builds on client strengths to find the solution to the problem. 2) During empowerment the worker addresses the needs of the client by expanding the client's current understanding of possibilities and outcomes. 3) And, collectivity focuses on connecting the client with resources, support groups, and recreation. This principle is focused on building client self-esteem by reducing social isolation. A fourth principle, suggested by Gutierrez (1990), is to engage the client in a power analysis of their current situation. This entails an analysis of how various conditions of powerlessness are affecting them internally and externally. The

empowerment approach is often long-term, as the process of clients taking small, individualized steps toward a broader long-term goal (Payne, 1997).

The Harm Reduction Model

On account of the model's primary focus of working with drug users, the harm reduction model will be explained in those terms. This model will later be explained and applied in working with battered women.

According to Tsui (2000), harm reduction is based on three central beliefs: 1) Habits/risks can be placed on a continuum; 2) addictive/risk-taking behavior towards abstinence is a stepwise process towards change; and 3) from Westermeyer (2000), sobriety is not the goal for everyone.

Considering each in turn, habitual behavior can be placed on a continuum ranging from excessive use to abstinence. Between these extremes are varying degrees of use and risk-taking behavior. The goal of harm reduction is to reduce the risk accompanying drug use, on one end of a continuum, toward a reduction in actual use and abstinence at the other end (Tsui, 2000).

Second, the process by which change occurs is step-wise toward abstinence. This is a client-centered approach in that focus of control and goal setting stays with the client. Rather than being imposed in an all-or-nothing manner as in abstinence-based programs, objectives are set with the goal being any movement, no matter how small, in the intended direction toward those objectives (Westermeyer, 2000).

Finally, Westermeyer (2000) defends the notion that sobriety is not for everyone. Harm reduction methodology accepts this notion by accepting the whole person as unique in their specific situation while not loosing sight of the fact that the user is responsible for

their use. With these perspectives in mind, gains may be attempted through use reduction and/or implementation of safer strategies of use while on the path to recovery.

As described in an earlier chapter, interwoven throughout these core beliefs, and central to the efficacy of harm reduction, is the Transtheoretical Stages of Change (Prochaska et al., 1994). This model implements a stage theory along a continuum of change. Attempting to facilitate growth for a client is determined by recognizing there are stages of change: 1) pre-contemplative, the idea of changing is not in the client's awareness; 2) contemplative, change is considered but ambivalence is high; 3) determination, the balance of ambivalence is leaning towards change; 4) action, change is physically attempted; 5) maintenance, maintaining level of change. The worker increases their ability to align themselves with the client's level of readiness. This change process is seldom linear nor static. Recognizing the client's stage of change, interventions may be more individualized to the client by addressing the issues and concerns relevant to the moment. In harm reduction, this is known as "meeting the clients where they are at," and it is the principle rule of effective work within this model.

Harm Reduction and Domestic Violence

According to Cox and Stoltenberg (1991), 50% of women who leave battered women's shelters return home to their abuser. In a study by Davis (1987), which focused on the attitudes of professionals who work with abused women, she found that "although most respondents spoke with deep understanding of the many clients who returned repeatedly to abusive spouse, there was a strong bias, most pronounced among shelter workers, against the women returning home" (p. 58). Cummins, First, and Toomey (1998) support Davis by stating that among professionals that work with women in

abusive relationships, there is an overwhelming attitude of all or nothing. Consequently, adequate services and support are lacking for women who return to their abusers. Cummins (1998) explains this attitude which further pathologizes women and minimizes the woman's competence and self-determination. This ultimately increases the risks that women face as a result of secondary victimization; they are to blame for the abuse and to blame for staying in the relationship.

Harm reduction is an approach whereby there is inherent acknowledgement and support toward women who remain in abusive relationships and have to endure albeit historical, but yet alive belief system. Confronting the barriers that women face by reducing her risks, increasing self-worth, and by saving lives are all goals within this approach. Even after a woman has left her abuser, she continues to be at risk. Owens-Manley (1999) state, "Although provisions of basic safety and protection are thought of as a short-term response, women may be in acute danger for as long as 2 years after they separate from their abusive partner" (p. 448). Owens-Manley (1999) further suggests that the historical belief that women can simply leave their abusive partner and return to a normal life is unrealistic. Women give up much more than just their partner when they leave, and to ignore the importance of on-going safety continues to put her at risk of injury and/or death.

Moreover, providing education is another key component of the worker's role Owens-Manley, 1999). Safety planning needs to be made a priority in working with women who live with their abuser. Reducing isolation that generally accompanies abused women can be facilitated through internal or external support systems. Finally,

the continuing need for unconditional support, whether she remains with her abuser or leaves him, continues to be the primary focus for increased safety and reduced injury.

An Integration and Application of Theories to Domestic Violence

The primary purpose and goal in working with women involved in abusive relationships, regardless of what stage of change they are in, is to reduce injury and ultimately save lives. The strengths perspective, empowerment approach, and harm reduction model all contain key concepts to promoting self-esteem, increasing strengths, enhancing power and balance, and in reducing the probability of injury and/or death.

In working with battered women who remain in abusive relationships, the strengths perspective is significant in providing support and aiding to the amount of control they have over their lives and situation. The strengths perspective, allows battered women to self-identify the areas of their lives that are working and builds on those areas, which facilitates the potential for further growth and increases the possibility for change. A second area within the strengths perspective that is noted when working with battered women is emphasis of resiliency. While many helping systems pathologize or stigmatize women who remain in abusive relationships, these tendencies ignore the resiliency in battered women. This resiliency is a primary focus to building on current strengths and facilitating change, regardless of what the change is and even if change is small. Therefore, the strengths perspective is used to support the decisions that battered women make and facilitates change by building on their current strengths and past resiliency.

The integration of the empowerment approach may maintain the process of

identifying and legitimizing strengths. To this is added the process of accessing their strengths and increasing power to find solutions by expanding a battered woman's understanding of outcomes and connecting them with resources. This process with battered women begins to expand into the broader areas of self-concept, a greater understanding for independence, and ultimately the potential for autonomy and growth. The empowerment approach is therefore utilized as a guide to support battered women and what they regard as helpful or useful, regardless of what others deem necessary.

The harm reduction model is the next level of integrating process and expansion. While key components of strengths and empowerment are not left behind, harm reduction adds the additional components of providing unconditional support, education, and finally incorporates safety planning towards the goal of reducing injury and saving lives.

Allowing the clients to assess their own situation, set individualized goals, and to progress at the pace and direction that they choose increases the amount of power that they have over their situation as well as their lives (Gutierrez et al., 1995). The integration of the strengths perspective, the empowerment approach and the harm reduction model contain key components that increase self esteem, enhance power, and reduce the potential for injury. While the process to achieve this may vary between clients, the worker's approach needs to always stay the same in their acknowledgement of client strengths and resilience (Wook & Middleman, 1992). Living with their abused partner, the harm reduction approach may impact a woman's decision to stay or leave the relationship, what precautions or safety guards they put in place, and how they integrate the social response from others into their decisions and plans. The experience women

have with living in domestic violence and using a harm reduction approach to manage their situation is the focus of this study. Harm reduction is used as a guiding perspective to explain and assess women's response while living with their abuser.

Summary

This chapter explored several theories, which characterize the harm reduction approach. The integration and application of these theories were also applied to the problem of domestic violence. In the next chapter, the methodology for this research study will be discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

The purpose of this research study is to interpret how the harm reduction approach impacts the experience of women living in abusive relationships. This interpretation will be executed through hermeneutics, to uncover a deeper understanding of the experience. The hermeneutic process of interpretation strives to illustrate a comprehensive understanding of human behavior and action. This is completed by reviewing the text in a circular fashion, finding common themes, which will result in a deeper understanding of the experience.

Components of this chapter will include a discussion of the research methodology, the restatement of the research question, the background of hermeneutic interpretive research, the research design, a description of the participants, the criteria for quality in interpretive research, the data collection methods, the process of analysis, and procedures employed for protection of the human participants.

The Research Question

The research question, How does the harm reduction approach impact the experience of women living in abusive relationships? will be explored by asking the women to: "Tell me how the services provided by this program have impacted your experience of living with an abusive partner." This initial question will be followed by several prompts to explore the shared experience of the research participants (See Appendix A).

Philosophical Background of Hermeneutic Interpretive Research

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) first developed the hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology as a way to reveal the experience of human beings. "Interpretive phenomenology offers an alternative to quantitative social studies geared toward social engineering because it is concerned with life world, human concerns, habits, skills, practices, experiential learning and notions...." (Benner, 1994, p. xx). Benner (1994) continues that Heidegger believed that interpretive phenomenology was the guide to uncover the true interpretation of human beings, what is "being" rather than "knowing," as well as the analysis for the structure of existence, "what does it mean to be human?"

Three main philosophical rules, according to Heidegger, are essential to the hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method. 1) the being of human is a self-interpreting activity; 2) this "activity" encompasses a clear understanding of what "being" actually means, and it is this understanding that allows a clearing for encounters; and 3) everyday events take place within this understanding which directs what everyday activity takes for granted (Brenner, 1994). Based on these rules, Brenner (1994) continues to add that 5 basic assumptions can be made on hermeneutic phenomenology. 1) human beings are social and communicative; 2) common meanings are found within our language, culture, skills, and events; 3) we are always in a hermeneutic circle of understanding; 4) interpretation involves a shared understanding and contains a three-fold fore-structure; and finally; 5) interpretation involves the relationship between the interpreter themselves and the dialog accessed.

Because commonality is the core in uncovering the true meaning in interpretive phenomenology, Benner (1994) suggests that 5 main commonalties explored in this type

of research are as follows: 1) *situation* 2) *embodiment*, 3) *temporality*, 4) *concern*, and 5) *common meanings*.

Situation refers to finding an understanding of how the participant is situated both historically and in their current life. Is the participant situated in positive social functioning, or does their past or present life consist of chaos, and conflict. *Embodiment* refers to how the participant responds to a particular situation, both physically and emotionally. Is the participant able to cope successfully with life stressors or crisis situations, or is their emotional and physical response deficient to the situation. *Temporality* is explained as having a sense of time. Does the participant have a true sense of time (here and now) or has it been stunted by past experience? *Concerns* refers to the ability to find meaning of their situation. Does the participant have a sense of what really matters to them, or are they unable to orientate meaningfully in the situation? *Common meaning* refers to presumed verbal and cultural meanings that create what is perceived and encourages agreement and disagreement between individuals.

It is in exploring these commonalties, that interpretation can begin. While it is clear that the participant holds a pre-conceived notion about their experience, so does the researcher. Both the participant and the researcher jointly understand, acquire new information and interpretation that shape the process of the hermeneutic circle (Koch, 1995).

Research Design

This research utilized the hermeneutic process of interpretive phenomenology to explore the shared meanings and common themes among women who live in abusive relationships. This research study also focused on the experience of these women and

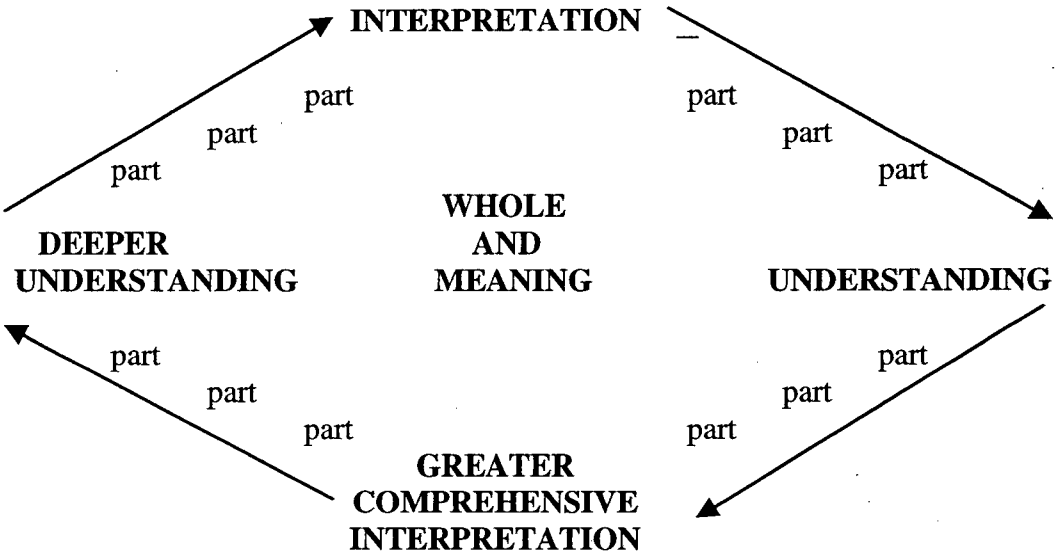
how the harm reduction approach has impacted this experience as they interpret it. This research study focused on the meaning of this experience rather than the measurement (Jenson & Davis, 1998).

The process of interpretive phenomenology is not considered to be linear, but rather characterized by the hermeneutic circle (MacLeod, 1996). The main idea behind this circle is that it consists of varying parts which make up the whole; while the interplay of these parts affect the whole. By understanding parts within this system on a individual level, adds enrichment and understanding to the whole itself, thus creating deeper meaning and understanding of the experience (MacLeod, 1996). See figure 4.1 for a visual representation of the circular motion of hermeneutic research.

Figure 4.1 represents the circular notion of hermeneutic research. While the whole and the meaning are in the center, the exterior of the circle is constructed of parts. In moving clockwise through the process of the approach, it is within these parts which we can interpret, understand, find a greater comprehensive interpretation, and finally, a deeper understanding of a particular issue. It is through this process of exploration, that the researcher is able to look at the participants experience to find meaning. Although finding the meaning behind the participant's world is the ultimate goal of this research design; this research will only uncover one such interpretation of the experience of these participants. There is never a final interpretation within this approach, only one that makes sense within the here and now (MacLeod, 1996).

This research design has several strengths and weaknesses, which are embedded in its foundation. According to Benner (1994), the hermeneutic interpretative phenomenology accounts for "everyday human experiences that are historical and

Figure 4.1. The circular interpretive process in hermeneutic research.



temporal and based on participating in language and cultural practices" (p. 74). Benner (1994) continues to state that this differs drastically from the technological view, which is interested in only data and statistics; thus ignoring the experience which can impact the true meaning of the results. A second area of strength in this design, according to Rudestam & Newton (1992), is that it is relatively inexpensive as a result of the number of subjects involved. Nonetheless, it is complex in that it demands a great deal of time and multiple visits between the researcher and the participants. Both parties involved need to be highly dedicated to the study in finding the true themes that surface. A second weakness that should be addressed is that this research design is not generalizable because of its small sample size.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, the number of participants was limited to three. All of the participants were women; two were currently living with an abusive male partner and one had recently separated from her abusive partner. All three women were participating in support services from an agency that practices the harm reduction approach.

Criteria for Quality in Interpretive Research

Lincoln (1995) explains the 8 emerging criteria for determining quality in interpretive research. This criteria, as follows, is listed in order from more to less formal: 1) *standards for judging quality in the inquiry community*; 2) *positionality*; 3) *community as arbiter of quality*; 4) *voice*; 5) *critical subjectivity*; 6) *reciprocity*; 7) *sacredness*; and, 8) *sharing the perquisite of privilege*.

Standards for judging quality in the inquiry community resemble the criteria to the traditional community of research. This criteria is proposed for the intention of definitively asking the question of whether or not the research is deserving of publication. According to Lincoln (1995), this set of criteria is an attempt to provide clarity, particularly those which are aimed at publication, and in serving a legitimate function within the conceptual practice of power. By reason that this research project does not aim towards publication, but rather to fulfill a requirement of the MSW program at Augsburg College, this criterion has limited bearing to this study. However, this thesis will be available for public use, as it will become an Augsburg library document.

Positionality refers to the partial imbalance found in textual composition. By limiting the biological, social and historical location of the researcher, the texts are limiting in their own truths except for when they exhibit similar characteristics. "Detachment and author objectivity are barriers to quality, not insurance of having achieved it" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 280). This researcher's personal experience with domestic violence and the harm reduction approach was explained in Chapter 1 in order to give a clear understanding of how this researcher understands the participants' experience and the lens from which interpretation and understanding is formulated.

Community as arbiter of quality focuses on the community, its knowledge, the connections, and the intention of community use. The intention of this criterion is to not serve the community in traditional ways through policy makers and community leaders, but to serve the community as a whole. "Thus research is first and foremost a community project, not a project of the academic disciplines alone (or even primarily)" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 282). The purpose of this study is to serve the community of women living in

abusive relationships, to attempt to understand their experience, and to draw out themes and strategies, which reduce their overall risks. The written interpretation was given back to the participants to read so that they could correct any misunderstandings or misinterpretation that might have arisen. There were none.

Voice refers to the researcher's obligation to speak for those who do not have access to forum. Because of the nature of the study, women who live with abusive partners are often silenced by their family, community, and their overall experience. This study raised questions about the cultural silence and the institutionalized policies and practices that surround domestic violence and their influence on the experience of those who live with an abusive partner. "Thus voice not only becomes a characteristic of interpretive work, but the extent to which alternative voices are heard is a criterion by which we can judge the openness, engagement and problematic nature of any text" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 283). This researcher strives to give voice to those participants that have had little opportunity to express themselves and their experience.

Critical subjectivity refers to the researcher's ability to use self-reflection, greater self-awareness, and to create a greater understanding of one's psychological state before, during and after the research process. This allows the researcher to engage the participants in a greater personal and social transformation. "...enables the researcher to begin to uncover dialectic relationships, array and discuss contradictions with the stories being recorded, and move with research participants towards action" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 283). Prior to the interviews, I explained my own personal interest in the topic of domestic abuse and the harm reduction model. The painfulness of the participant's experiences deeply impacted this researcher, in that at times, I needed to process the

stories that were relayed to me. I am deeply grateful for having been granted entry into a sacred place of story, life and experience that each woman was so courageous to share.

Reciprocity refers to the relationships between the participants and the researcher. "Persons are always in relation....one cannot study persons without studying the relations they make with others...the observer...constitutes himself as part of the field of study" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 283). This relationship is built on trust, mutuality, and caring; while the researcher is in tune with the participant's experience and interpretation, it is equally important for them to be in tune with their own experience and interpretation (Benner, 1994). The researcher and participants engaged as co-researchers, with the participants providing the essential data that was needed in order for me to be able to conduct this study. This study could not have been undertaken without the collaborative roles the four of us played in making it happen.

Sacredness refers to the concern for justice, interpersonal respect and human dignity. A great deal of attention needs to be focused on creating an egalitarian relationship, not based on unequal power between the researcher and the participant, but rather to support and nourish an equal relationship (Lincoln, 1995). "Only by recapturing the sense of sacredness about that which nourishes and sustains us can we learn how both to inquire sanely and to live in peace" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 284). The participants shared personal and sensitive information about their experiences with me. I am deeply appreciative for that. I have profound respect for the strength and courage they hold to tell their own stories, as difficult as it was to do so. It is through this respect, that a great deal of care was given in interpreting their experience.

Sharing the perquisites of privilege refers to what the researcher owes the participants for their participation in the study. While most research is geared toward the researcher gaining privilege, financial gain, and prestige, most participants receive few benefits (Lincoln, 1995). While the researcher acknowledges this trend, and is indebted to the participants for assisting this researcher in completing a MSW thesis, this study attempted to portray the participants as the true researchers. It is throughout their participation and telling of their story that perhaps more inquiry can be pursued and additional services can be provided to women who are currently living in abusive relationships. It is this researcher's aspiration that the results of this study will in turn ultimately assist the participants in the end.

Data Collection Methods

The research for this study included semi-structured interviews with 3 women who were or had been recently living with abusive partners and who attend support services that utilized the harm reduction approach. This interview began with the initial question of, "Tell me how the services provided by this program have impacted your experience in living with an abusive partner?" This was followed by several prompts to probe for a deeper understanding of their experience. By allowing the participants to tell their story in this manner, more detail, concern, and considerations that have shaped the participants experience was able to unfold. This approach captured common experiences of thoughts, feelings, struggles, survival techniques, and accomplishments. Additionally, it demonstrated how this experience has impacted them either in a positive or negative way. This approach also reviewed the distinctions between the participants and their experience.

The participants were selected on a first come, first serve basis following the distribution of a flyer by the facilitator of a women's "at risk" support group. This flyer explained the criteria for participating, the purpose of the study, the time required to complete the study, as well as confidentiality concerns. Each research participant received a $20 honorarium for participating. Interested participants contacted the researcher directly by phone (not to reveal their interest to the group facilitator) to further discuss the guidelines of this study. The first 3 interested participants were selected. To reduce any additional risks, participants were allowed to pick the place and time for the interview, and were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason without penalty.

The interviews for this study were audiotaped and then transcribed into written text with the written permission of the participants. The participants and all persons mentioned in the narratives were given pseudonyms in the transcribed text to protect their identities. It is through this written text that common themes and experiences were examined so that a greater understanding of the persons interviewed, their experience, events, and practices could be understood at a greater depth. By examining the text in this manner, the researcher was able to view the whole and the parts of their experience simultaneously.

Process of Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was completed at length through a series of steps, which can be viewed as circular in nature. The researcher or interpreter of text was adhered to these steps in order to view the entire experience not only in its parts, but also

as the whole. Seven steps were followed by this researcher and the research team who assisted in the interpretation process (Widera-Wysoczanska, 1999).

1) *Open minded reading of the transcript.* The transcript was read on various occasions by the researcher and research team while adhering to the details of the text with an open mind of its wording and content. This allowed the research team to gain a better understanding of the content and the overall experience of the participants.

2) *Looking for themes:* The research team selected similar themes throughout the text that appear to focus on the shared meaning and experience of the participants.

3) *Discovering key themes*: The researcher and research team reviewed the text independently of each other, searching for similarities which are fundamental for understanding the participants experience on a deeper level.

4) *Looking for unity of meaning*: The researcher reviewed the interpretations found by the research team, and identified similarities and differences within these interpretations. The text was reviewed again to verify these findings and to further validate the results.

5) *Creation of meaning*: The identified themes within the text were again reviewed to further study them for the aspect of similarities and differences.

6) *Formation of a personal picture of the experience*: Comparing the meaning within all of the themes was then assessed in order to gain a greater understanding of the commonalties shared among the women.

7) *Formation of a personal model of the experience*: This was the final step in preparing the interpretation of the text. As the identification of all themes come to a

close, the researcher again reviewed the text to look for portions of the text that support the themes and gave strength to the final interpretation.

In following these steps of the process of analysis, the researcher and the research team worked in a circular manner, uncovering each part which contains a shared theme or meaning for the participants. The researcher and research team also noted and deleted any information that did not hold value to the purpose of this study. The final stage of this analysis included the participants, themselves, reviewing the written interpretation in order to further strengthen the common themes among the participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

In order to protect the participants in this study, an application was submitted to the Augsburg College Institutional Review Board and received approval (IRB # 2000-50-1) prior to the start of this project. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant, and questions were answered to the best of this researcher's knowledge. Participants signed informed consent agreements before the interview process began. Separate consent forms were also signed for the audiotaping of the interview and the use of direct quotations in the thesis. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. Participants were informed of any potential risks that this researcher may have foreseen prior to the interview. Risks could include safety issues with her partner, and /or the reoccurrence of painful memories or thoughts in describing their experience. The following were attempts made to minimize these risks to the best of the researcher's ability. Each participant was given several outside resources that would address such risks for counseling and support. The interviews were audiotaped to ensure accuracy and

then transcribed into written text. Identifying information as well as names were removed or altered in the transcribed text to protect the identity of the participants and their families. The audiotapes and transcribed text were stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home and will be destroyed on August 1, 2001.

Summary

The research methodology was discussed and outlined in this chapter. The research design was explicated, the data collection procedure and analysis were described and the protection of human subjects were delineated. In the following chapter, the findings will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings and Discussion

This research study explored the lived experience of women living in abusive relationships and who attend harm reduction support services. Lived experience was understood to be the ways in which human beings encounter situations in relation to the worlds that they inhabit and the worlds that inhabit them (Koch, 1995). By virtue of different backgrounds and different experiences, one person's world can never be shared entirely with another; however, the worlds of those who have lived similar experiences may share common themes and meaning. Uncovering shared themes and meaning in the participants' lived experience was the focus of this study.

The narratives of the women interviewed are essential in that the experience is organized and integrated historically; thus influencing the events of their present day life. This process of creating and recreating the ongoing story is in itself related to their life, in which violence in only a part (Edleson et al., 1996). The interpretation in this study is not an ending to the alternatives for interpretation but rather represents one way of understanding the experience of the three women who participated in this study. Additional themes and meanings lie hidden, waiting to be revealed. The participants themselves will reinterpret their experience, finding new meaning and uncovering a deeper understanding of their experience as their lives unfold and they further reflect.

Becoming Aware

While the narratives and experience of the women interviewed differ from one another, one way of recognizing the differences in each woman is by examining her

situation in view of the stages of change (Prochaska & DiClemente 1990). According to Prochaska & DiClemente 1990, there are five stages one progresses towards change; 1) pre-contemplation; 2) contemplation; 3) determination; 4) action, and finally; 5) maintenance. Recognizing the stage of change is key in understanding the independent and interdependent nature of experience. Anne is located in the pre-contemplative stage; she continues to reside with her abusive partner; and at this point, she is not considering leaving. Jenna is located at the determination stage moving towards action; she continues to reside with her abusive partner, but is considering and slowly making changes to leave. Beth is located at the maintenance stage. She has left her abusive partner, but continues the struggle to maintain safety, to not return to her abusive partner, nor to enter into another abusive relationship. Baker (1997) supports that battered women often go through a series of stages before finally leaving. She continues to add that this progression does not necessarily follow the successive order of change. Without adequate assistance, progression of change may flow back and forth, repeating stages at various points of life or may become stagnate. Although each woman's location varies on the continuum, their experiences contain similar meaning and common themes.

The narratives of the women interviewed revealed that the harm reduction approach impacted their experience of living with an abusive partner by creating an environment that was helpful for women to increase awareness of their own life and situation. This awareness is reflected in each of their stories through awareness of responsibility, awareness of safeguarding practices, and in awareness of safety and support versus stigma and isolation. Despite their situational differences, each woman's awareness of their own life and situation is evident in the stories they share.

Becoming aware is one experience that the women have in common. The women's stories illuminate a shared understanding of what it means to become aware while living in abusive relationships, and how this awareness has shaped their own understanding of their experience.

Each participant describes her experience and the process of becoming aware. Jenna makes the analogy of becoming aware to domestic violence similarly to becoming aware of being an alcoholic: "It's not like I decide, I think I'll be an alcoholic now. It happens [alcoholism or being in relationship that's abusive] and then you become aware along the way that there are behaviors that are a problem, but before you know it, you become aware that you are in this cycle that you never imagined you would be in." While each participant reveals a portion of her experience to the researcher, the common theme of *becoming aware* begins to unfold among all three participants.

Awareness of Responsibility

One interpretation of *becoming aware* was described through the women's understanding of awareness of responsibility. As battered women begin to become aware of themselves and their situation of abuse, an awareness of responsibility begins to surface. As Jenna described "talking" about her situation, she stated that by "talking" made it "more real." She described this as increasing her awareness towards change, responsibility of the situation, and the realistic struggle of "just leaving."

> Jenna states: I think the services have helped me generate more awareness and just confronting the issue. Talking to someone about it makes it more real. So talking to the social worker helps, I think, to some extent make it more real

> for me and that I do need to do something about it and make it change...Really, this is his [abusers] problem and I've taken it on and I know its become my problem. But the direct problem is him and he needs to be the focus of programs as much as I do...it's too bad that society doesn't focus on him and say okay, since you're the one with the problem, here's services for you....it's much harder for me if I have to change daycare for my daughter, if I have to move, if I have to switch a job...if I have to live in fear cause I know he knows where I am and he can get back to me.

As Jenna describes her own awareness of responsibility for herself and situation, she indicates the focus of responsibility. While she acknowledges her responsibility for it "become[ing]" her problem, Jenna is equally aware that the focus of ending the violence is placed on her to make a change. This focus is directed by society that places the responsibility on women by telling them "just leave." When the attitude to "just leave" is placed on battered women, it ignores holding the abuser accountable for his behavior (Eisikovits et al., 1998) As Jenna acknowledges her participation in the relationship, she also acknowledges that to "just leave" would require an elimination of her current life; "change daycare...move... switch jobs...live in fear." Jenna's comments reflect the concerns of other social workers and researchers who note that policies could be more effective if aimed at the perpetrator (Baker, 1997). As Jenna explains in depth, what she would need to do to leave, she points out her awareness on the lack of services and accountability held towards her abuser.

> Well, that's fine for me [in reference to leaving her partner], but then he moves on and on and on down the line, and it doesn't matter if he goes to jail for six

> months...for hitting somebody...what if he killed someone...don't we want to stop that? He can change. And if you don't believe that he can change, then you're believing that his behavior is not his responsibility. But if he acknowledges that it's his responsibility and realizes that he has choices and that his behaviors are his choices then he can change. I don't see myself as a victim, I see myself as someone who's dealing with somebody who's got a problem.

As Jenna continues to state her awareness of responsibility for staying with an abusive partner, her awareness goes beyond the violence in her own relationship. By acknowledging that her abuser needs to be held accountable, Jenna is implying that would end the cycle of violence. As society pressures women to "just leave" and the abuser is not held accountable, the broad spectrum is ignored in that the violence may continue on in this or even in the next relationship. While Jenna wants the abuse to end, whether she stays or leaves, she is equally aware that despite the changes she makes, it is his behavior that must change to end the violence.

Common to these participant's stories is that the impact goes beyond their individual relationships and is extended to society as a whole. Examining themselves, their relationships, and their experiences, denying the label of victim and making reference to being "a survivor" are common practices of women who attended the harm reduction support services.

Wood et al. (1992) state that "consciousness-raising and awareness is necessary when people present problems that obviously incriminate structural conditions" (p. 90). This is explained in more depth as women are encouraged to not only reflect on their own individual experience, but the larger pattern which includes the oppression of women by

society as a whole. Women who are systematically limited by not only their partner, but by the social institutions in which they sought help, need to discover a new perception of themselves, not as a victim but as a survivor or an empowered person (Wood et al., 1992). Speaking in general terms, Jenna explains how becoming aware of responsibility can lead to change which extends from being an empowered person:

> This awareness allows people to take responsibility for things and so you can make changes. If you don't see any responsibility, then it is really hard to make changes because you don't see yourself as an empowered person. Really, it's not about the right to leave the relationship, it is about the right to be your own person. That's why you leave. You don't leave because you just want to leave, or should leave, or need to leave, you leave because you know that you want to be your own person and you're dying in the situation...and you find the strength in yourself and others to maybe do that, but its just not simple. You can't just tell a person with a problem to stop having the problem [in reference to leaving]. You try to teach the person [the batterer] how to stop having the problem....and again; the focus should be on that it's the man's problem.

As women become aware that it is ultimately their partner's behavior that must change, they begin to focus on themselves and what they need to do to feel empowered and to survive. A second area of awareness that surfaced within the interviews was the awareness of support.

Awareness of Support

According to Woods et al. (1992), the concept of mutual aid and support is a key component in women *becoming aware*. As women begin to tell their stories and receive

non-judgmental support for the decision they have made thus far, they begin to recognize that they are not alone or powerless over their partner. As the women talked about their experience in living with an abusive partner, their awareness of support surfaced. Woods (1992) continues to add, "when women are able to talk about their personal experiences in a group context, they begin to understand their individual connectedness to a system of oppression" (p. 91). Within the interviews the women described "talking" about the abuse, and their experience with others who understood, to be a strategy for support.

> Anne described what was helpful for her: Just basically by being there for me to be able to call or come up and talk...getting feedback from other women that have been in the same situation and how they've worked through it....Giving me feedback and how to get out of the situation or to figure out how to change it. They [social workers and other group members] have been there to support me...before I started coming here, I would just hold everything in...and get so frustrated.

As Anne reflects on how harm reduction support services has helped her, she examines her feelings of frustration prior to finding this support. This frustration was explained by Anne: "wanting to use, being depressed, loosing patients with the kids." Research indicate that chemical abuse, mental health concerns, and parenting difficulties are not uncommon results among women who live in abusive relationships and who have little support (Edleson et al., 1996).

Unconditional support by those who understood and who could relate to the experience of women living with an abusive partner was commonly described as a significant aspect related to *becoming aware*. Allowing women to talk about their

experience from their own perspective, without placing judgement on them, acknowledges their strengths as survivors rather than stigmatizing them as victims who have little control (Goffman, 1963). Jenna continues to reinforce the importance of non-judgmental support within her interview:

> I just really need, when I talk to people about this... to not be told that I have to make a choice between...and this person. What I have appreciated (from the harm reduction social workers) for the most part, they have been nonjudgmental in saying...*I want to encourage you to make good decisions for yourself. Here's maybe what some of those good decisions might involve, but I'm not here to tell you what to do or what decisions you need to make. You need to come to that on your own.* For me that's immensely important.

For Jenna, being able to talk about her situation, encouragement from the workers, and not being judged by her decisions were all supportive techniques. For many battered women who feel like they have little control, this approach recognizes that women are strong individuals who have somehow managed a complex living situation, and who ultimately understand their own situation best. A non-judgmental approach entails listening to women's stories, assisting women to develop a greater sense of control, building on current strengths, and providing unconditional support. The participants described this approach as "helpful" and "supportive" in increasing awareness and assisting the women make changes.

While isolation is a common theme among abused women (Gordon, 1996), each participant, in this study, described their awareness of isolation concerns and actively sought out services despite the risks of further harm by their partners. It is in this

awareness for a needed support systems, which they determine as being helpful, that each woman found strength not only in themselves, but also through other women's similar experiences. Gordon (1996) states, "While women's groups are still much less available to women than are more traditional forms of therapy...studies reveal that women found such groups to be highly effective in raising their self esteem and decreasing feelings of isolation. These groups are generally disposed to take client goals seriously and to adapt the helping process to the abused women's self-defined needs" (p. 327).

Awareness of Safeguarding Practices

The awareness of safeguarding practices was also reflected in the women's stories. These safeguarding practices were described as an awareness of safety options and through ways of becoming prepared. Jenna talks about her increased awareness of safeguarding practices. "I was also made more aware of some safety options, safety plans, what I can do more to protect myself and then also just kind of what services are available, such as where I can go if I need to get away, shelters, calling the police, things like that." Jenna describes her increased awareness of safeguarding practices that she's learned to further protect herself from danger. While safety is always the primary concern in working with battered women, increasing a battered women's awareness of resources, laws, and other helping systems also expands a woman's ability to react quickly if needed; even if she is not ready to leave her abusive partner. As Jenna and Anne remain with their abusive partner, both recognize the potential for harm and have become aware of how they can be prepared to stay safe. Jenna continues to describe other safeguarding practices that she has learned to reduce the potential for harm:

> ...stay out of the bathroom, for example, ...stay away from sharp objects...have a bag at somebody else's place in case I needed to just leave immediately and not have anything with me...have someone I can call and just have a code word that I use with that person, to trigger that person to realize there's danger... if I'm really in danger and in too much danger to call 911.

Jenna and Anne described safeguarding practices in which they have become aware. Both women also remarked on being prepared and having a plan in place if they needed to leave in a hurry. Safety planning with women who remain with their abuser is viewed as a vital step in reducing risks and increasing their sense of power over the situation (Thomas, 2000). When women become aware of their options for safety, they also gain a sense of control in that they are prepared and able to take action if necessary. "Safety is paramount and needs to be provided while women test out and consider their various options, for it is they who will have to live with the consequences (Wood & Middleman, p. 93)."

While safeguarding practices have been described as techniques to reduce risks, Anne described a second type of safeguarding practice. As Anne previously described the benefits of attending a support group, she also described keeping her support a secret from her partner as a way to increase her safety. Anne states:

> Because he don't like his business being put out nowhere and he don't like me talking about the past, things that have happened, and it would cause a big, big problem. And I'm like, okay, I'm not going to tell you what I'm doing. He knows that I come up here for a support group, but he does not know what kind of support group.

The secrecy that Ann describes perhaps points to her need for support, yet she is aware of her partner's reaction should her secret be discovered. This secrecy, which is common among battered women, often results in an increase in isolation due to the shame of their own situation, and the fear that their partner will discover that she is taking control of her situation (Gordon, 1996). While Anne's determination to seek help is apparent, her overall safety continues to be at risk.

Although Beth has left her abusive partner, she too continues to be at risk and is aware that she must continue to implement safeguarding practices. Beth describes how she continues to be stalked by her abusive partner, continues to lives in fear, and how she implements safeguarding practices:

> You know, you think your over it [the abuse after leaving the relationship] and you can be strong...and all of the sudden they come back [her abusive partner]...and your strength goes right down cause of your fear...and it's not easy to get away from cause you become so afraid and that fear is so strong. [Beth continues, and describe her own safeguarding practices]: Calling a friend...calling the police...calling a group member...getting a restraining order...and pack[ing] a gun.

Women who are in the process of leaving or have left their abusive partner are more than twice as likely to be victims of homicide than women who stay with their abusive partners (Wilson & Daly, 1993). Although Beth thought that she would be safe after leaving, she soon discovered that this was not the case, as her abuser continued to stalk her. While Beth has "just left" the relationship as advised by many from the "helping system," she continues to live in fear and is at risk for harm from her ex-partner.

"Although provisions of basic safety and protection are thought of as a short-term response, women may be in acute danger for as long as 2 years after they separate from their abusive partner" (Owens-Manley, 1999, p. 448). They further suggest that the historical belief that women can simply leave their abusive partner and return to a normal life is unrealistic. Edelson et al. (1996) supports this statement: "Within communities, the perpetrator often enjoys higher status than his victim. This may prompt even greater withdrawal by women, and the potential loss of work, friendships, and neighborhoods. The creation of isolation is a deliberate strategy, intended to separate the women [and children] being abused from information, advice and emotional support" (p. 79). Women give up much more than their partner when they leave, and to ignore the importance of on-going support and safety continues to put her at risk of injury and/or death. Edelson et al. (1996) continues to state that women who leave, also give up what he determines as "community." He defines "community" as shared history, social identity, connections to place/others, status and class. While women are often forced to give up "community" when leaving, men often retain their community as a result of their male status.

Awareness of Balancing

While the women described their awareness of responsibility, support, and safeguarding practices, the participants also talked of an awareness of having to balance their safety and support with stigma and isolation.

Safety versus Stigma

The participants, who earlier describe their awareness of significant safeguarding practices, also communicated utilizing safeguarding practices which were described as "devastating," in which they felt "disrespected." Although police intervention provided

immediate safety, it was noted as having a "Band-Aid" effect. According to Baker (1997), "women often reveal disappointment and often anger at how police treated them or handled a situation" (p. 68). Baker (1997) continues to add that inefficient police tactics and rude behavior towards battered women, can often result in the decision not to turn to the police for help when needed. Jenna describes one encounter she had in calling the police and how their attitudes towards her as an abused woman caused her to rethink using the police as a future option.

> I called the police because he was threatening over the phone. He was at my place and he was threatening to do damage to the property. So, I went there with the police. He had burned the carpets and burned some of my things. At that point, and just my explanation to the police of a violent incident that had occurred between us, should jolt some more responsiveness. They [police] told me...*it's very cold, were not going to make him leave...if he has been living with you or staying there with you, he has the right to stay there and be there....it's basically become his place....well you're just going to be with him again anyway, right?* [Jenna continues in response to the police comments]: Okay, she's just going to go back with him anyway so she doesn't have the right to be safe?...and that link should not be made...even if she goes back to him, she has a right to be safe.

Jenna describes her awareness of a stigma that is placed on abused women, not having the right to be safe as she may in fact return to her abuser. Jenna's comments regarding the attitudes of the police are not unusual. Sirles et al. (1993) state that battered women often get mixed messages from law enforcement agencies. While many women feel that the police are useful for deterring violence, many women make reference to feeling

devalued or disqualified from services due to past choices (Sirles et al., 1993). Both Anne and Beth also described similar incidents in which they sought help from the police and felt "disqualified" from being safe as a result of past choices. Beth continued to relay stories in her interview that included not calling the police in a time of need "cause they weren't going to do anything about it." "Failure to respond adequately to abused women indicates a failure to recognize the importance of the problem and to challenge the acceptance of male violence in our society" (Gordon, 1996 p. 327). As battered women describe this common interaction with the police, it becomes clear that the complexity and difficulties of individual battered women were not acknowledged. Stigmatizing women, who turn to the police and other helping systems in time of need, continues to limit the assistance necessary for women to negotiate a successful resolution to their problem. This stigma that each woman describes is not only implemented by the surrounding "helping systems," but was also felt from within their own community of friends and family.

Support versus Isolation

As noted earlier, mutual aid and social support plays a key role in battered women *becoming aware.* As women turn to their support systems in time of need, only to be rejected as a result of past choices, perhaps the amount of power that women feel, begins to fade; further isolating them, further losing what little control they may have felt. Jenna explains a time in which she had left her abusive partner and sought help from a friend:

> ...A friend of mine who I was staying with said...*Okay, so now he knows that you can call the police, change the locks and you'll let him back in anyway.* [Jenna responds to her friends statement]: I think that's why women become

> isolated...because the way that they are treated by their supposed support network...I think [that attitude] it's going to drive a lot of women to go to the person who's hurting them as their supporter...when the person who's hurting you can understand you better than anybody else...and give you more support than anybody else, you're going to turn to that person and that's what isolates women.

Jenna described her experience of not feeling supported by her friend and how that lack of support could increase her own isolation. She continued to state that giving support to abused women is not that difficult; and having to choose between the two will most likely result in friendships that end. Beth and Anne also commented on their lack of contact with friends and family as a result of similar comments. Jenna continues: "...treating the person who's in it [the abusive relationship] like they don't know what they're doing or just judging them or treating them disrespectfully; I think is devastating." As abused women begin to recognize their limited options for seeking support, the bond between the batterer and woman can strengthen, and thus create even a greater resistance towards leaving. As support to abused women is extended from their abuser, the risk of increased isolation, further abuse, and potential death are reinforced.

As the women described their experience of living with an abusive partner, one prevalent theme for all three women was them *becoming aware*. This awareness was revealed from the support they found within harm reduction support services they attended. The meaningfulness of battered women's awareness lay in their increased understanding of themselves, their relationship, and the inner strength that they held to survive.

Summary

The impacts of the harm reduction approach on the experience of women living in abusive relationships were explored and discussed in this chapter. One theme, *becoming aware*, was followed throughout the participants' narratives and was supported through excerpts from the transcripts of their interviews. Discussion of related literature expanded the interpretations presented.

CHAPTER SIX

Implications

The contributions of this study will be set forth in this chapter. Implications for social work practice and policy will be discussed, as well as recommendations for further research with women who remain in abusive relationships. How the harm reduction approach impacts the experience of women living in abusive relationships will also be presented.

Contributions of Study

Although there is a vast number of research conducted on domestic abuse, few studies have been done with women who remain in abusive relationships. In addition, the domestic violence research focusing on the harm reduction approach is even more limited; and most conducted are with chemical dependency users. This study attempted to create a deeper understanding of battered women's experience and how the harm reduction approach might impact their experience.

The hermeneutic interpretive design of this research study allowed for greater depth of exploration and understanding of the experience of women who remain in abusive relationships as well as how the harm reduction approach might impact their experience. Participants described their experiences without restraint and appeared at ease in sharing feelings and personal information. Their "storiedness" provided rich material for interpretive research and thus contributed to deeper understanding of the shared meanings and common themes of a battered woman's experience for readers of this study.

As a result of the stigma around the topic of battered women who remain with their abusive partner, women's opportunity to talk about their experiences are limited. Participation in this study provided a forum in which these women could tell their stories, reflect and re-examine their experience for material that had been overlooked or concealed from them before.

Interviewing more women who live in abusive relationships and who attend harm reduction support services could strengthen this study. This study could also be expanded to interviewing women within a group setting to uncover previously unrecognized and unexamined commonalties and differences. This would perhaps enrich the stories by uncovering similar or contrasting experiences.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy

The offering of the hermeneutic method for interpretive research is the lesson it teaches for the practice of social work. As practitioners, we cannot perceive what human beings with whom we work perceive. What we can do is try to understand how others are in their worlds and how they perceive the broader culture to which we all belong. This was made apparent several times over in the process of interpreting for deeper and deeper understanding of the women's lived experience of domestic abuse. At times, I found myself looking into the experience of these women, and making my own interpretations of their experience that were not grounded by their words. Time and time again, I had to step back outside myself and this research project, reflect on the filters through which I was viewing the participants' realities, and re-engage in the circularity of the hermeneutic interpretive process and the complexity of human experience.

Learning to step back outside of myself, in order to separate my beliefs and experience from those of others with whom I am engaged in the practice of social work, has been a primary benefit of my graduate school training. This research process has been an integral piece of that training. The experience of interpreting only what was said in the interviews and returning again and again to find that I had perceived more than what was expressed, revealed to me how careful we as social workers need to be about the interpretations we make of client's experiences. Although knowledge based on prior experience is invaluable, it is the practitioner's responsibility to take the experiences of each new client as the true reality for that individual. The practitioner needs always to examine with the client the congruency between their separate definitions and interpretations of the situation the client faces. Similarly, in the circular process of hermeneutic interpretation, the validity of my interpretation of the women's experience was supported by quoting excerpts from the interview transcripts and by returning the findings to the participants so that they could verify the accuracy of my understanding.

Understanding the differences in battered women who remain in abusive relationships challenges the thinking of social workers and other helping systems to remain open in their responses to these women. This study raised several questions regarding the different responses by helping systems and how these responses impacted the women's experience in seeking help and making change. Moreover, it raises questions around responsibility and how battered women are supported versus stigmatized. Eisikovits et al. (1998) suggests that practitioners and other helping systems need to use care in making judgments and assumptions about women who remain with their abusive partner. He continues, "...staying does not necessarily mean that the

women are resigned to violence" (p. 430). Thus, the tendency to view leaving their abusive partner as an exclusive sign of a woman's strength needs to be scrutinized. Practitioners and other helping systems need to review their assumptions of how battered women cope and should focus on validating battered women's experiences and choices, rather than stigmatizing and blaming the women for the problems (Eisikovits et al., 1999). Policies that provide adequate, comprehensive and humane responses that support the individual battered women's experience and choices are essential to enhancing lives, reducing risks, and saving lives.

Additional training for practitioners, law enforcement agents and other helping systems should include empathy training and knowledge of what is needed by abused women. While the responsibility of "just leaving" is often placed on battered women, policies also need to be integrated to holding the abuser accountable for the behavior. As one participant stated, even if a battered women does leave successfully, the cycle of violence may continue by the abuser in his next relationship. This cycle of violence may also be perpetuated by the children who witness these acts of violence. Finally, from the women interviewed, this study suggests that the tolerance for violence towards women who remain in abusive relationship is without question and very much accepted by the majority culture. It is the ethical responsibility of social workers and other help agents to end this tolerance for violence, even if women are not yet prepared to leave the relationship. In ending this tolerance, social workers and other help agents need to remain open in their response to battered women, looking at the individual need of each battered woman they encounter. Social workers should also advocate for public policy, which holds the abuser accountable. This accountability needs to go beyond jail

sentencing, but to employ education and help for men that are abusive. This education should also be expanded to society as a whole, with the emphasis that domestic violence would no longer be tolerated. According to one participant: "It is not an issue of whether we pay for it, it is an issue of how we pay for it. And we can pay for it in the long run, or we can pay for it up-front." Social workers also need to help diminish the power of stigma that surrounds battered women; stigmas that can isolate women who remain in abusive relationships. Social workers' efforts to make the voices of battered women more audible in society could have a powerful impact on a woman's decision to seek help when needed rather than to deny help as a result of stigma. Perhaps that could be partly accomplished through future research in search of a deeper understanding of a battered woman's experience and a transformation of the current "helping system."

Implications for Further Research

There are several areas that could be considered for further research with battered women utilizing the harm reduction approach. First, further research with women who remain in abusive relationships and the application of harm reduction could include a larger number of participants. This continued research might include participants from a broader diversity of cultural backgrounds, and may also be expanded to all types of family structures, not exclusively male violence on females. This study suggests that although there are common threads which binds a battered woman's experience, each woman interviewed was viewed in a different stage of change; thus having different needs unique to her own situation. Whereas the stages of change (Prochaska et al., 1992) are central to the efficacy of Harm reduction, this too could be addressed through further research. Although the stages of change may be an appropriate model to use in assessing

the "readiness" of change with chemical abusers, questions remain for this model in working with battered women. Assessing battered women according to the stages of change suggests that it is the sole responsibility of the battered woman to make change; thus not holding the batterer accountable for his behavior or making any change. Perhaps this model would be better served in assessing the "readiness" of change in abusive males. Furthermore, using a tool, which assesses a battered woman's situation, may overlook or conceal their individual situations, individual needs, and individual strengths. Further research could also be conducted to examine the impacts of assessment tools with battered women.

Summary

This chapter examined the contributions of this study and made recommendations for social work practice and policy. Suggestions were also given for further research studies to increase our understanding of the impacts of the harm reduction approach on women living in abusive relationships.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

To be asked by the researcher

Initial Question:

1. Tell me how the services provided by this program have impacted your experience of living with an abusive partner.

Prompts:

1. What stands out for you?
2. What does this mean to you?
3. Tell me more about what that was like.
4. For instance?
5. Can you give me an example?
6. Can you clarify that?

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Darla Segelstrom. I am currently in my final year of a Masters in Social Work program at Augsburg College. As part of our program requirements, we must work on a thesis, or research paper, in an area of interest to us. I have chosen to interview women who are currently living with an abusive partner and who attend a support group that follows the Harm reduction model. I have reviewed a great deal of research that only focuses on women leaving their abuser. I am interested in hearing about the experiences of women who remain in abusive relationships and how the harm reduction model impacts that experience.

The process entails a 60-minute in-person interview in which I would ask you a few questions. I would like to audiotape the interview for transcription purposes. To ensure confidentiality, the audiotapes and my notes would be destroyed when I have finished my study and paper. You will also be asked to read through the interpretation of your interview for accuracy.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate, you will receive an honorarium, total value $20.00 whether or not you complete the interview. I will also accommodate you to the best of my ability, by meeting you at the time and location of your choice. Possible indirect benefits include helping to improve the understanding of the researcher and social work practitioners about your experience. You may also benefit by reflecting on these events and sharing your experience on how the Harm Reduction model has impacted your experience.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly by pager at (612) 818-1473. Please leave your name, phone number, and the best time to reach you. Prior to the interview, I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have and explain this process in more detail.

Thank you for your consideration,

Darla Segelstrom

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

A Hermeneutic Study of Women Who Live with

An Abusive Partner and Attend a Support Group Which Focuses on the Harm Reduction Model

You are invited to participate in my research study designed to look at the experience of women who live with an abusive partner and who attend a support group, which focuses on the Harm Reduction model. This research study will specifically look at the experience of women and the impact of the experience through Harm Reduction. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be involved in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. This research study is being conducted by Darla Segelstrom in partial fulfillment of the Master of Social Work thesis requirement at ***Augsburg College.***

What will happen during the study?

The study consists of one audiotaped interview lasting about 60 minutes. As Masters of Social Work student who is working on her thesis will conduct the interview. You will be asked to relate stories about your experience as a woman living with an abusive partner and how the support services offered at this program impact that experience. After the interview is complete, I will listen to the audiotapes and write an interpretation. I will then contact you once again and ask that you read over my interpretations of your interview. Changes may be made to the written interpretation to reflect your comments.

Are there any risks?

It is possible that through the discussion and recollection of your story, painful memories or thoughts could occur. If at any point during the interview you feel too uncomfortable to go on, you may stop the interview without consequence. After the interview, the following 24-hour counseling referrals at your own expense are available for you to contact should the need arise.

Hennepin County/Minneapolis Area	**Crisis Intervention Center**	**(612) 347-3161**
	Chrysalis	**(612) 871-2603**
Ramsey County/ St. Paul Area	**Regions Hospital**	**(651) 221-8922**
7 County Metro Area	**Crisis Connection**	**(612) 379-6363**

Are there any benefits?

It is possible that you could experience an enhanced sense of well being or satisfaction as a result of telling your story. Also, participants will receive an honorarium worth $20.00 after the study.

When and where will the interview be done?

The interview will be scheduled at a time and place that are convenient to you. Interviews will be done in person.

Who will have access to the interview material?

The audiotaped interviews will be transcribe by a trained transcriptionist and then destroyed. The trained transcriptionist will be required to sign a confidentiality form to ensure your privacy. Any identifying information from the interview, including your name, will be removed or altered on the written transcript. The transcripts will be shared with the researcher's thesis advisor during the process of writing the thesis and several members of a research team who will be reading, interpreting, and reflecting on the transcripts. All information is confidential. However, the researcher cannot guarantee anonymity due to the small sample size, but I will make every effort to maintain anonymity. Transcripts will be identified with numbered codes only, and no names or identifiable information will be used in this study. Raw date, including the audiotapes, will be destroyed no later than August 31, 2001.

What if you change your mind?

You are free to withdraw from this study or refuse permission for the use of your interview or transcript at any time and the $20.00 honorarium will be yours to keep. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with Catholic Charities/Seton Services or Augsburg College.

Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on aspects of the study that are unclear. I will attempt to answer any questions you may have prior to, during, or following the study. If I am unable to answer any of your questions to your satisfaction, you may also call my thesis advisor, Maria Dinis at (612) 330-1704.

Authorization:

I, _____, have read this consent form and decide to participate in the research project described above. My signature indicates that I give permission for information I provide during the interview to be used for a thesis research project. I will be given a copy of this form for my records.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant *Date*

_____

Compete address (for purpose of re-contacting you to verify my interpretation of your experience)

_____

Telephone number (for purpose of re-contacting you to verify my interpretation of your experience)

In addition:

2) I consent to audiotaped.

_____ _____

Signature of participant Date

3) I consent to the use of direct quotes from my interview.

_____ _____

Signature of participant *Date*

If you have any questions or concerns you may reach me at:

Darla Seglestrom
Augsburg College, MSW Student
Phone: (612) 818-1473

Or if you need further information, you may contact my thesis advisor:

Maria Dinis, Ph.D.
C/O Augsburg College
Business Phone: (612) 330-1704