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At risk of losing themselves : emotionally abused women and the traumatic bond

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At Risk of Losing Themselves:
Emotionally Abused Women and the
Traumatic Bond

ABSTRACT

This research study demonstrates how women's orientation to relationships can leave them personally at risk of losing themselves in attachment relationships that are abusive. This research hypothesized that women find it difficult to leave abusive relationships because they fear that the loss of the relationship will result in a loss of self. They stay because they believe that to lose the relationship is to lose something of their essential self. This study confirms the hypothesis but demonstrates that this belief is a false supposition and that the reverse is true. When women remain in abusive relationships in an attempt to preserve the relationship, they suffer a loss of self. The central guiding question of this thesis is: "What makes it possible for a heterosexual woman to overcome the effects of traumatic attachment in exiting a long-term intimate partner relationship characterized by emotional and psychological abuse?" Two psychological theories are offered to understand the effects of abuse in an attachment relationship and what must be overcome to exit the relationship both physically and emotionally. The theoretical framework of relational-cultural theory and trauma theory provide insight into the emotional entrapment of an abusive relationship as well as the path to freedom and successful separation resolution. The study has implications for social work practice on both the individual and societal level.

AT RISK OF LOSING THEMSELVES: EMOTIONALLY ABUSED WOMEN AND THE

TRAUMATIC BOND

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that interpersonal violence continues to be a widespread problem that often

remains hidden with as many as one in five women experiencing some kind of abuse in an

intimate or "attachment" relationship (Hegarty, O'Doherty, Gunn, Pierce, & Taft, 2008).

Moreover, abuse in attachment relationships has potentially traumatic consequences and

enduring adverse effects. Much of this thesis is devoted to delineating the adverse effects of

abuse that occur within an attachment relationship and their potential to create a form of

emotional captivity that makes it difficult to exit the relationship.

This thesis explores the emotional captivity that is created in an abusive relationship and

what is necessary to overcome its effects in order to emotionally separate from the relationship.

The central guiding question of this thesis is: "What makes it possible for a heterosexual woman

to overcome the effects of traumatic attachment in exiting a long-term intimate partner

relationship characterized by emotional and psychological abuse?" Two psychological theories

are offered to understand the effects of abuse in an attachment relationship and what must be

overcome to exit the relationship both physically and emotionally. The theoretical framework

will provide insight into the emotional entrapment of an abusive relationship as well as the path

to freedom and successful separation resolution.

Definition of Terms

The emotional and psychological attachment that occurs within the context of an intimate relationship that is abusive is referred to as *traumatic attachment* or *traumatic bonding* for the purpose of this research. I use these terms interchangeably. I also use the descriptors *intimate* and *attachment* interchangeably when referring to relationships. I take the liberty to do so because current psychosocial literature depicts relationships in this way when referring to adults. Occasionally, relationships of this nature may also be referred to as *affectional* relationships in keeping with the literature. The special type of trauma experienced by individuals in an intimate or attachment relationship that is abusive and where individuals find it difficult to leave will be referred to as *attachment trauma.* Allen (2001) defines attachment trauma as *trauma that occurs within an attachment relationship as well as to trauma done to the attachment system itself.* An understanding of attachment trauma is essential to the understanding of the experience of a woman in an abusive relationship. Attachment trauma creates extreme distress as well as undermining the ability to regulate that distress (Allen, 2001). This theoretical thesis provides insight into the phenomenon of non-physical abuse in intimate partner relationships and its impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of the woman.

Much research time and effort has been spent on the topic of violence and its impact on women. Less theoretical and empirical concentration has been paid to various forms of emotional or psychological abuse and their potentially traumatic consequences (Allen, 2001). According to James & MacKinnon (2010), "Unlike physical abuse, non-physical abuse leaves no physical injury, is often not a discrete event, and may easily be confused with conflict. Moreover, symptoms of depression, anxiety, confusion, and low self-esteem, may result from

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either current or past abuse or both, and individuals with these symptoms may not perceive themselves as being abused" (p. 125).

Literature reveals a limited amount of information on how to work effectively with women who find themselves emotionally entrapped in an intimate partner relationship that is abusive. According to Hegarty et al. (2008), "Despite the strong association between partner abuse and poor mental and physical health outcomes, information on how health professionals should assist abused women is relatively limited" (p. 377). Studies also show that women find it difficult to identify their experience as abuse if they have been exposed to violence in some form or other since childhood (Hegarty et al., 2008). This is especially so if the violence has been non-physical in nature.

Psychological abuse has not been widely explored and is difficult to define. Furthermore, there is little consensus among professionals about what actually constitutes psychological abuse (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000). This study endeavors to define these non-physical forms of abuse for helping professionals and victims. Clinical social workers who understand the emotional entrapment of abused women are better equipped to recognize the problem in its several presentations as well as assist in overcoming it.

Due to the relatively limited amount of information on how to assist abused women, this study is necessary and important to clinical social work as it seeks to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the psychological impact of the phenomenon of abuse in attachment relationships and how to assist in the change process. The damage of emotional and psychological abuse is insidious and its effects are pervasive and resistant to treatment. Many clients present with symptoms of depression and anxiety that may result from interpersonal violence that is non-physical in nature and difficult to identify. Clinical social workers working

with abused women need the best possible understanding of women's experiences when choosing interventions to help them.

Bowlby (1988) described the role of the therapist as a trusted travel companion who accompanies a client on an exploratory journey of their attachment experience and acts as a secure base. As a secure base, therapists can create a "safe place" for clients to process memories and to explore the internal representations of the self and other that have been created as a result of abuse. Therapists are in a unique position to serve as a reliable attachment figure and to facilitate successful separation resolution from an abusive relationship. "By being consistent and reliable, reducing fear at times of heightened stress and showing interest in trying to understand and help, the therapist promotes an atmosphere of safety and freedom to explore experiences, some of which are unfortunate or unhappy" (Sable, 1998, p. 59).

Given the scope of the problem, with as many as one in five women experiencing some kind of abuse in an intimate relationship (Hegarty et al., 2008), it is important for clinical social workers to have an adequate understanding of the practical and theoretical ramifications of abuse in attachment relationships and its often invisible but debilitating effects on women. A large amount of the literature on women in abusive relationships asks the question: "Why does she stay?" A greater emphasis of research time and analysis needs to focus on the question: "What enables her to leave and to do so successfully?" Anderson & Saunders (2003) maintain that more focused attention needs to be paid to understanding the challenges that women face in the aftermath of separation. According to Anderson & Saunders (2003), "Some women just out of the abusive relationship may have greater psychological difficulties than those who are still in it. For those experiencing the most stress, psychological health can worsen over time. Researchers

and practitioners need to pay more attention to the plight of women who have left abusive partners." (p. 163).

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

Relational-cultural theory (originally self-in-relation theory) was chosen as a theoretical framework to understand a woman's experience in an abusive relationship. This theory draws upon the work of the Stone Center at Wellesley College regarding women's development and explains the ways in which relationships shape a woman's sense-of-self. This work posits that relationships form the central component of a woman's identity. Relational-cultural theory supports the idea that it is difficult for women to leave because they value relationship (Gilligan, 1986).

Relational theorists hypothesize that a woman's orientation to relationships is the key factor in the development of her identity (Gilligan, 1982). The sense-of-self that a woman experiences is a "self-in-relation" (Surrey, 1991b). This developmental approach sheds light on the experience of the woman who finds herself in an intimate relationship that is abusive. It explains that it is difficult for the woman to leave a long-term relationship because she believes that the loss of the relationship represents a loss of her essential self. The relational-cultural model also describes a therapeutic approach which involves mutual empathy and work with shame in order to move clients out of isolation and toward growth fostering relationships.

Trauma Theory was chosen to highlight the captivity aspect of a traumatic attachment as well as explore the complicated and difficult process of breaking free. In order to do this, I draw upon the work of Judith Herman (1992) who proposes that victims experience a sense of disconnection from themselves and others as the result of trauma. Resolution of trauma is realized in stages as the victim is first able to achieve a sense of safety. Safety allows for the

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necessary exploration of traumatic events as well as for mourning what has been lost. Victims are then able to reconnect with themselves and with others.

This theoretical study endeavors to expand the research on women in abusive relationships by considering the phenomenon alongside the literature on non-physical forms of abuse, traumatic attachment, and both trauma and relational-cultural theories. It explains why it is difficult for them to recognize the abuse and separate from it. The following chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of the theoretical orientation and methodology of the study as well as the subject of traumatic attachment/bonding. Chapter Three presents a picture of non-physical forms of abuse and reviews empirical studies and psychosocial literature pertinent to the experience of abused women. Chapters Four and Five present a more comprehensive discussion of relational-cultural theory and trauma theory. Chapter Six applies constructs from relational-cultural theory and trauma theory to the experiences of abused women in long-term relationships where some degree of traumatic attachment has occurred. The final chapter is a discussion of emotional abuse and the formation of the traumatic bond in intimate partner relationships and further develops my analysis of how principles from relational-cultural theory and trauma theory combine or synthesize to offer real answers to the question of how women successfully exit abusive long-term relationships. This study attempts to expand clinicians' understanding of traumatic attachment in abusive relationships and offers implications for clinical work with this population.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I lay out a framework for the method that I have chosen to examine abuse in long-terms relationships and for the chapters that follow. As already discussed, this study explores the emotional and psychological experience of heterosexual women in the process of separating from a long-term relationship that has been characterized by non-physical forms of abuse. This study takes at its starting point the assumption that in a long-term relationship of this nature some measure of traumatic bonding has occurred. How do heterosexual women living in attachment relationships that are emotionally and psychologically abusive experience attempts to separate? How does the experience of a traumatic attachment or traumatic bond affect her ability to do so? What makes it possible to overcome the effects of traumatic attachment/bonding? Finally, how can clinical social workers help clients to accomplish successful separation resolution?

I attempt to answer these questions by using two theoretical perspectives: relational-cultural theory and trauma theory. In this chapter, I briefly introduce these two theories and present my rationale for choosing each to examine this phenomenon. I also describe in greater detail the concept of traumatic attachment, particularly as it relates to the experience of heterosexual women in long-term relationships. A thorough understanding of traumatic attachment is necessary in order to appreciate the difficulty a woman experiences in a long-term

relationship that is abusive. This understanding is necessary in order to assist a woman in the process of exiting a relationship in which traumatic attachment has occurred and has made it emotionally difficult to leave. This chapter not only describes the concept of traumatic attachment but also explains why concepts from relational-cultural theory and trauma theory provide a framework for treatment and successful recovery. I close the chapter with a brief discussion of potential methodological biases and a consideration of the strengths and limitations of my plan as well as an outline of the chapters that follow.

Relational-cultural theory and trauma theory were chosen as theoretical lenses by which to view both the phenomenon of abuse in attachment relationships as well as successful separation resolution. Relational-cultural theorists propose that women grow and develop as a "self-in-relation" (Surrey, 1991b). This research hypothesizes that it is their developmental orientation to relationships that makes women vulnerable to abuse because it makes it more difficult for them to detach from relationships that are abusive.

Relational-Cultural Theory

Prior to the women's movement of the 1970s, traditional theories on psychological development stressed the importance of separation and individuation as the primary motivational emphasis of human development. The movement toward autonomous functioning was held to be the approved model of human development. These traditional theories were rooted in the male experience and incorrectly applied to female development (Kaplan, 1986). An alternative theory began to emerge in the 1980s and developed as a result of feminist thinking and the work of the Stone Center at Wellesley College. An essential characteristic of this theory was that women's psychological development comes about as the result of connection and affiliation with others (Miller, 1976).

The new model introduced the concept of psychological growth as a phenomenon that occurs within the context of relationships and in association with others. Surrey (1991b) offers a definition of the word *relationship* that distinguishes it from *attachment.* "By relationship, I mean an experience of emotional and cognitive *inter-subjectivity:* the ongoing inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others and the expectation of mutuality in this regard" (p. 61).

The fundamental premise of the new model was that women's psychological development is shaped and guided by their orientation to relationships. This orientation to relationships forms the central component of their identities throughout the life cycle (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991). This theory of women's development was in contrast to the thinking of modern American theorists who posited a movement toward separation and individuation as the ideal. The new model proposed a "self-in-relation" theory in which self-development occurred within the context of relationships.

Originally coined as "self-in-relation," the theory has been furthered developed and expanded to encompass culture in its understanding of psychological development and renamed "relational-cultural theory." Relational-cultural theorists understand that psychological development is rooted in relationship and culture and have extended the model to depict the experience of all people (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Lesser & Pope (2007) state: "The goal of development is not an increasing sense of separation but one of enhanced connection. It is the process of mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment that lead to personal growth through connection" (p. 70). Relational-cultural theory encourages personal growth through connection with others in relationships that are mutually engaging, empathic, and empowering (Lesser & Pope, 2007).

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory highlights the psychological captivity that is created as the result of traumatic bonding sheds light on the difficulty that is experienced in the struggle to separate from an abusive relationship (Dutton & Painter, 1981). The theoretical framework provides insight into the emotional entrapment of an abusive intimate relationship. This insight is necessary in order to offer guidance to clinicians who work with this population as well as provide understanding to the women themselves.

The study of psychological trauma first came into public awareness for a brief period at the end of the nineteenth century when the medical field became interested in the origin and treatment of the phenomenon of hysteria. In the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, interest in psychological trauma peaked again but waned until it appeared once more as soldiers returned from the war in Viet Nam. The trauma of domestic and sexual violence came into public awareness at this time as well. Herman (1992) attributes the "episodic amnesia" that accompanies the systematic study of psychological trauma to "the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil" (p. 7). She states: "In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness" (p. 9).

I include this brief discussion on the history of psychological trauma in order to highlight the controversial nature of the subject and to suggest that the regular abuse of power in attachment relationships becomes a continuous source of psychological trauma for those who are either unable or unwilling to leave. The silence and secrecy demanded by the abuser creates an emotional captivity that isolates or disconnects the woman from other sources of support and

eventually from the reality of her own experience and sense-of-self. This theoretical thesis will demonstrate that "loss of self" is central to the psychological struggle of an emotionally abused woman in a long-term relationship. Therefore, successful separation resolution must focus on restoration of a cohesive sense-of-self and is accomplished in the context of mutual relationships with others.

Allen (2001) depicts trauma as occurring on a continuum that ranges from impersonal on the one end to attachment trauma on the other with attachment trauma being the most personal and most devastating. The abuse of power is a common theme in interpersonal and attachment trauma. This abuse of power by one who is in a position of strength either physically, economically, or socially, creates intense suffering because the "role of attachment is to provide protection and reduce stress" (Allen, 2001, p 43).

Attachment trauma is especially damaging because it undermines the primary task of attachment, which is to provide protection and regulate distress (Allen, 2001). Allen states: "Attachment trauma not only generates extreme distress but also, more importantly, undermines the development of mental and interpersonal capacities to regulate that distress" (p. 10). If attachment is essential to distress regulation, than it is easy to understand why repetitive trauma in a long-term attachment relationship would engender mental and emotional instability.

Traumatic experiences engender turmoil and confusion and rob individuals of the emotional safety and meaningful interactions that attachment relationships are designed to provide. According to Allen (2001),

Attachment trauma, by undermining security, blocks (the) avenue of distress regulation to varying degrees. But the trouble does not end there. Working models tend to be self-

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perpetuating. When the working models are based on traumatic interactions, trauma

tends to beget trauma (p. 61).

Trauma in attachment relationships lays the foundation for, emotional instability, mental

impairment, and negative behavioral consequences.

Traumatic Attachment

Dutton & Painter (1993) have done extensive work in examining the emotional ties of

women to their abusive partners and propose that attachment in abusive relationships is the result

of a traumatically produced emotional bond that happens outside of the awareness of the woman.

Women may ignore the subtle indications of abuse when the relationship is new and exciting and

are unaware of the emotional entrapment that is occurring. The first incident of abuse may be

mild. Subsequent occurrences that are identified and challenged may elicit remorse and

apologies. These apologies are readily accepted and strengthen the emotional attachment/bond.

The pattern is not initially evident because the abuse is considered to be an aberration and the

emotional bond continues to grow (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

As the incidents of abuse increase, the woman may begin to believe that the fault lies

within her and that she is responsible to change her behavior in order to prevent the abuse from

occurring. Cognitive mechanisms such as self-blame and introjection shift the responsibility for

the abuse to the woman and away from the abuser where it belongs. According to Dutton and

Painter (1981), "The introjections of blame by the battered woman can be seen as either an ego

defense mechanism or a cognitive coping mechanism" (p. 151). This distorted belief may

temporarily serve to help her cope with the abuse but if it persists will "contribute to her inability

to leave the relationship" (p. 151).

These authors hypothesize that two common structural traits characterize abusive relationships where traumatic bonding occurs. Those structural traits are power imbalance and intermittent abuse. Power imbalance results when a woman or person in a subordinate role develops a negative self-appraisal, a reduction in self-efficacy, and a dependence upon the partner or person in domination (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

It is not difficult to understand how this may occur in a patriarchal society characterized by stereotypical gender roles. A woman who gives up financial independence in order to care for children and the home becomes dependent upon her partner for material and emotional support. If her husband is abusive of his position, she is trapped both economically and emotionally and cannot free herself without considerable disruption to the family for which she provides care. His power and control over many aspects of life becomes firmly established. The emotional abuse further generates feelings of powerlessness in the woman and serves to maintain the relational homeostasis (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Herman (1992) points out the "commonalities between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes" (p. 3).

Dutton & Painter (1993) found that "attachment, experienced trauma, and lowered self-esteem constitute a syndrome of interrelated effects of abuse" and that power differentials and intermittency of abuse are "strong predictors of post-separation attachment" (p. 116). According to Dutton & Painter (1993), "Traumatic bonding theory postulates that when a woman finally leaves an abusive relationship, her immediate fears may begin to subside and her hidden attachment to the abuser will begin to manifest itself" (p. 117). If the partner (abuser) is contrite

and affectionate an emotionally drained and vulnerable woman may decide to return. The cycle may continue with the woman seemingly helpless to successfully exit the relationship.

Helping professionals who are aware of the dynamics of traumatic bonding can be more effective in aiding the woman at her most vulnerable moments and help her to understand her ambivalence and its source. According to Dutton & Painter (1981), "Such knowledge may aid the woman in her struggle to extricate herself from a psychologically complex and entrapping relationship" (p. 152). Clinical social workers are in a unique position to shed light on the abusive cycle and explain the phenomenon of traumatic attachment leaving "the onus for separation on the patient" (Allen, 2001, p.72).

According to Dutton & Painter (1993), "Social psychologists have found that unequal power relationships can become increasingly unbalanced over time, to the point where the power dynamic itself produces pathology in individuals" (p. 118). This creates what these authors call an "undertow" back to the abuser when positive memories of the relationship are recalled. Clinical social workers can supply accurate, realistic, and reliable reminders of the facts of the relationship and help to counteract the pull of the traumatically formed attachment.

Barnett & LaViolette (1993) put forward the theory that women find it difficult to leave abusive relationships because they have learned to endure the mistreatment and because of the socialization process that conditions women to believe that the success or failure of the relationship is their responsibility. According to Barnett & LaViolette (1993), "Battered women form attachments and become dependent upon their male partners in the same the same way that other women do, following the same path as their non-battered sisters" (p.22). These authors demonstrated through numerous case examples that women do not remain in abusive relationships because of some inherent flaw in their character or personality. They explain that

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cultural mores and sex-role socialization combine to make it difficult for a woman to leave an intimate relationship that is abusive and that "becoming a battered woman could happen to anyone" (p.22).

Denial and minimization of the abuse becomes a regular part of a woman's armor when she is forced to defend against the unthinkable reality that the relationship in which she has invested so much of herself is destructive. For many women, the loss of the relationship is more difficult to consider than the on-going abuse. According to Barnett & LaViolette (1993),

> Emotional abuse (e.g., verbal outbursts, withdrawal, jealousy), rather than physical abuse, generates much of the fear in a battering relationship. Because emotional abuse seems less potent, it is difficult to justify making major changes in one's life, such as giving up a home, financial security, intimacy, social support, and a job. In this light, leaving because of emotional abuse, a known stressor may seem disproportionate in view of the enormity and unknown quality of the change (p. 65).

These authors call attention to the entrapment that is created through lowered self esteem, intermittency of abuse with promises to change, and the growing emotional dependency created as a result of the threat to attachment bonds emphasizing that "becoming a battered woman could happen to anyone" (p.68).

Research Approach

Relational-cultural theory highlights the ways in which a woman's orientation to relationships increases her vulnerability to traumatic bonding and difficulty in separating from an abusive relationship. Trauma theory adds its own lens to the psychological captivity created when abuse occurs in an intimate partner relationship. Principles from relational-cultural theory and trauma theory also combine or synthesize to offer real answers to the phenomenon of how

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women successfully exit long-term relationships. Resolution of trauma is realized in stages as the victim is first able to achieve a sense of safety. Safety allows for the necessary exploration of traumatic events as well as for mourning what has been lost. Victims are then able to reconnect with themselves and with others.

Biases of the Methodology

Potential biases of my methodology might include the fact that I am a woman examining a phenomenon that is experienced principally by women in a patriarchal society. I have written and spoken throughout this thesis in a female voice and realize that at times I may have been guilty of prejudicial or dichotomous thinking. As a woman, I am keenly aware of the special vulnerability of women in a culture that is still predominantly male-oriented.

Lerner (1988) suggests that it is necessary that we keep the family and social context in view lest we polarize the sexes and forget that men also develop in the context of family relationships and thrive in human connectedness. I appreciate the way that relational-cultural theory has remained a "work in progress." It has expanded to include the experience of all people (regardless of gender) who are marginalized in a society/culture that promotes dominance.

I am also influenced by the experience of having worked as an intern in a domestic violence unit where the majority of the victims were women and as a social work intern in both a partial hospital program and an adult out-patient program where relational trauma was/is a common experience of many clients seeking services. In addition, this study gives attention to only a small percentage of the population by the narrow construction of words such as "heterosexual" and "woman" and "long-term." Many have struggled in attachment relationships

where an unequal power differential has created an imbalance of power that has contributed to abuse.

The major limitation of this study is that it is being undertaken through analysis of the literature. It is therefore being done at a distance from the actual experiences of heterosexual women in the process of exiting long-term relationships. An empirical study involving in-depth interviews of women who have been successful in leaving abusive relationships would contribute to the understanding of traumatic attachment and the path to freedom and separation resolution.

Despite its limitations, a theoretical approach allows for a deeper consideration of the phenomenon through two different theoretical lenses as well as a formulation of how those theories can be applied in clinical work with this population. Strengths of this study include the fact that a theoretical thesis contributes to the understanding of clinicians in regard to the emotional and psychological difficulties experienced by women who struggle with stay/leave decisions. Further, it expands thinking about the best treatment approach in work with these women (and men) who have suffered as a result of trauma in attachment relationships.

In this chapter, I introduced the concept of traumatic attachment and began to argue for its relevance as a factor in the difficulty women experience in leaving long-term intimate partner relationships. I also gave a brief overview of the two theoretical perspectives used in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. I identified some potential methodological biases and offered some ideas on the strengths and limitations of my plan. In the following chapter, I introduce the phenomenon of abuse in an intimate partner relationship. I focus on the characteristics of non-physical forms of abuse as found in the current psychosocial literature. Finally, I highlight some recent empirical studies examining the phenomenon of abuse in intimate relationships and the difficulties women encounter in their struggle to leave an abusive partner.

CHAPTER THREE

ABUSE IN INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

Allen (2001) states: "Just as the need for secure attachment does not end with adulthood, neither does attachment trauma. Abuse in adulthood has an overwhelming gender bias, consisting predominantly of attacks on women by men" (pp. 33-34). This chapter will delineate the different aspects of abuse as well as draw attention to empirical research examining the topic of women entrapped in abusive relationships. This study focuses primarily on non-physical forms of abuse and the problem of defining it as well as recognizing it. It is this problem that contributes to the difficulty experienced by the victims of abuse as well as that of helping professionals treating it.

Abusive Relationships

Domestic violence came to the forefront of society's consciousness in 1979 with the publication of Lenore Walker's *The Battered Woman.* Most researchers define battering as physical violence resulting in bodily injury (Walker, 1979). Walker found that when women were given the opportunity to describe their experiences, they maintained that they felt more injured by the psychological abuse than the physical abuse (Walker, 1979). As a result, Walker (1979) began to collect data on both forms of abuse and found that they could not be separated in battering relationships. However, psychological abuse may occur apart from physical abuse and

its effects are equally as damaging (Loring, 1994). Abuse that occurs without the presence of sexual or physical battering is referred to as non-physical abuse for the purpose of this thesis.

Non-physical abuse may be verbal, emotional, or psychological in nature. It can go undetected for years because it leaves no visible sign while it attacks the woman's sense-of-self. Much of the damage of physical and sexual abuse is also non-physical in nature. In addition, in much of the literature concerning non-physical abuse, the words "emotional" and "psychological" are used interchangeably (James & MacKinnon, 2010).

James & MacKinnon (2010) present a unique framework that may be used by helping professionals to identify emotional and psychological abuse in work with couples and families where abuse may be non-physical in nature and go unrecognized and unaddressed in couples' or family therapy. This framework compares non-physical abuse to an iceberg whose tip may be evident on the surface but whose actual substance may be submerged and initially undetectable. It is important to distinguish the presence of non-physical abuse and not confuse it with relationship conflict in order to treat it effectively.

These authors describe non-physical abuse as occurring on three levels. Verbal abuse is identified by words, tone, and body language that are hostile and demeaning in nature and somehow diminish the dignity of the target person. The target person feels humiliated and emotionally wounded. The verbal abuse is first degree in nature if it is of short duration and not repetitively used to manipulate and control (James & MacKinnon, 2010).

Emotional abuse occurs over a longer duration of time and is intended to punish and control. It includes on-going verbal abuse, threats of abandonment or intent to cause harm, and causes considerable anguish and suffering to the target person. According to James & MacKinnon (2010),

Emotional abuse is most destructive within an attachment relationship because the target person is unable or unwilling to end the relationship. The paradox is that the distressed target person often seeks comfort and closeness from the abuser, the very person who is the source of the threat (p. 118).

When emotional abuse repeatedly undermines the partner's sense-of-self by attacking her personhood, defining her reality, and isolating her, it broaches into the realm of psychological abuse (James & MacKinnon, 2010). According to these authors, "Eventually, she believes the abuse is warranted, hides the situation from others for fear of being blamed, and becomes clinically depressed and more dependent and attached to the abuser (James & MacKinnon, 2010, p. 122).

Psychological abuse is described as third degree non-physical abuse. The psychologically abused woman doubts her own perceptions of the reality of the abuse. This form of abuse incorporates the actions of verbal and emotional abuse and erodes the woman's confidence and self-esteem. According to James & MacKinnon (2010), "The abuser deliberately controls through isolation, humiliation and shame, imposing a definition onto the target person of 'bad,' 'mad,' or 'inadequate'" (p. 120).

Research indicates that the effects of non-physical abuse can be equally if not more devastating than the effects of physical abuse. Physical and sexual abuse rarely occur without some form of verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse. Psychological abuse may generate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in women whose intimate partner relationships are characterized by this form of non-physical abuse (MacKinnon, 2008). Symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, flashbacks, hyper-arousal, hyper-vigilance, intrusive thoughts, and constriction or numbing. According to Mackinnon (2008), "Even women who have not

experienced prior abuse and enter a relationship with their confidence intact, will experience severe physical and psychological effects if they remain in the relationship with a partner who is psychologically abusive" (p. 6).

Verbal Abuse

In a verbally abusive relationship a partner uses words in a manner to control or manipulate and seeks to gain power over the other rather than communicate in a mutually beneficial and life giving manner. Verbal abuse does not promote the welfare of the partner but undermines the trust, love, and respect that intimate partner relationships are intended to promote. According to Evans (2010), "One of the greatest needs is to understand and to be understood. In a verbally abusive relationship, the partner's need to understand and to be understood is not met" (p. 47). The woman attempts to make herself understood but is repeatedly rebuffed and attacked. The verbal abuser has no desire to understand but simply to dominate and control the relationship.

According to Evans (1996),

Verbal abuse is a violation not a conflict. There is a definite difference between conflict and abuse. In a conflict each participant wants something different. In order to resolve the conflict, the two people in the relationship discuss their wants, needs, and reasons while mutually seeking a creative solution. Verbal abuse, on the other hand, is very different from a conflict. If we describe verbal abuse from the standpoint of boundary violation, we would describe it as an intrusion upon, or disregard of one's self by a person (p. 127).

Verbal abuse of one partner by another may not occur in the presence of witnesses. In public, the verbal abuser may appear to be respectful and courteous. This further contributes to the confusion and turmoil experienced by the person being abused.

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Allen (2001) maintains that verbal abuse is an indicator of psychological maltreatment and encourages therapists not to underestimate the damage that is done by verbal battering. He cites work done with physically abused women in a psycho-education group. These participants "protested that verbal assaults were far more destructive to their well-being than physical assaults" (p. 37).

Emotional Abuse

According to Loring (1994), "Disruption of connection is the core of emotional abuse, while the struggle to attach is the hallmark of the emotionally abused woman. The typical abuser moves in and out of bonding with the victim, periodically sharing warmth and empathy, then cutting them off with overt and covert abuse" (p. 25). A woman in an emotionally abusive relationship struggles to maintain the intimacy and connection in the midst of confusion and self-doubt.

Attachment, as described by Bowlby (1969), was meant to provide physical safety and emotional security and places attachment as central in coping with trauma. Therefore, attachment trauma creates extreme stress while undermining the capacity to regulate that distress (Allen, 2001). The desire for connection is not shared equally in an abusive relationship. A woman in an emotionally abusive relationship seeks to maintain attachment with the abuser because she longs to regain the lost feelings of safety and connection.

According to Loring (1994), "Most couples experience periods of conflict and times when one partner's preoccupations separate him or her from the other. The harsh, unrelenting assaults and withdrawal in an emotionally abusive relationship are very different" (p. 29). Withdrawal is used as a method of control in an abusive relationship and is experienced as emotional abandonment.

The suffering in emotionally abusive relationships is as intense and pervasive as that experienced by trauma victims (Loring, 1994). Trauma is experienced as a threat to one's life or physical integrity. Emotional and psychological abuse threaten the loss of one's identity and sense-of-self. According to Loring (1994), "Victims of emotional assault from a life companion experience a similar sense of shock and disbelief after each incident of abuse. What could be more unthinkable, more shocking than cruelty and degradation in what is supposed to be a loving, caring, nurturing partnership" (p. 36)?

Victims of emotional abuse persevere in attempt to connect with their partners. They struggle with self-doubt and self-criticism reflective of the abuser's criticisms. They feel inadequate and undeserving. Shame prevents them from sharing their feelings with others and leaves them feeling lonely and isolated.

Psychological Abuse

All women are vulnerable to psychological abuse. Psychological abuse involves abuse of interpersonal power by one person in order to create submission in another (Chang, 1996). According to Chang (1996), "In many cases, the emotional damage of psychological abuse is as serious as the consequences of physical abuse. Because of the erosion of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-concept that results from psychological abuse, psychic bruises are often deeper, more lasting, and more devastating than physical bruises" (p. 12).

Empirical Research

The concept of abuse in intimate partner relationships is confusing and troubling. Relationships are intended to provide care and protection and provide a refuge from the stresses and strains of the outside world. However, studies show that this is often not the case. Literature concerned with the difficulty encountered by women in abusive relationships confirms the

complexity of the problem as well as highlighting both personal and situational factors that create an "undertow" back to the relationship. Personal factorss that lead to a decision to return to an abusive relationship include strong commitment to the relationship, self-blame, and optimism for improvement. Situational factors include childcare needs, financial concerns, and availability of social support (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003).

Narrative Constructions

According to Brosi & Rolling (2010), "Narrative therapy can be especially useful for understanding the meaning battered women assign to their unique situations through the exploration of internalized beliefs resulting from lived experiences" (p. 238). Their study examined the narrative constructions of battered women who had left their abusive partners and were able to emerge from these violent relationships as survivors. The major focus of the research was to determine key elements of the narrative that emerge in the stories of women who have taken the first step toward removing themselves from an abusive relationship" (Brosi & Rolling, 2010).

A sample of eight battered women volunteered to participate in the study. The women ranged in age from 21 to 52. Seven were Caucasian and one was Native American. All had children and six were married. Interviews were taped and recorded verbatim. Several themes emerged from three categories that captured the strength and resiliency of the women in the decision making process of leaving their abusive relationships. Themes around unique outcomes included: seeking external support, reaching a turning point, and leaving for the sake of the children. Themes around the dominant cultural category included: attitudes toward divorce, role as helper, and conflict avoidance. Themes around support for a new narrative included: social, practical, and spiritual support, a desire to help others, a new attitude toward self, and contempt

for the relationship (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). According to these authors, belief that they were unable to change the abuser allowed them to shift their "efforts and resources away from helping him to creating a new and stronger self-story" (Brosi & Rolling, 2010, p. 247).

Chang (1996) used the narrative constructions of 16 women to describe the phenomenon of psychological abuse in marriage. She traced the evolution of their relationships and organized the information that they provided in order to critique and expand existing information on psychological abuse. She also traced their evolving identities as the women lost connection with themselves in the process of "becoming a wife" as dictated by the pattern that society laid out for them. Chang (1996) writes:

> Following the narrative of women who have been psychologically abused, we find that their first response is to defend with denial, discounting the seriousness or even existence of the problem. They believe his view of reality and blame themselves for not being good enough. Accepting his interpersonal exploitiveness, lack of empathy, narcissistic sense of entitlement, and need to dominate, she ignores her own growing dissatisfaction. Eventually the consistent need to adapt and accommodate to him destroys her sense-of-self. She becomes less and less of the person she once was and more physically and emotionally ill (p. 115).

Anxiety is created as women live with the sense of constant disapproval by the one whose good opinion they long to obtain.

Chang (1996) outlines the "turning points" as the women were able break free of societal programming and begin to take care of themselves. This eventually led to exiting their relationships and changing their lives. External support was essential at this point in the process. According to Chang (1996),

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For all the participants, external support was necessary before they were able to leave;

someone else had to identify the relationship as abusive and offer support and

understanding. This outside support is an even more essential catalyst in psychologically

abusive relationships because the abuse does not leave visible scars and the husbands

constantly tell them nothing is wrong (p. 120).

As the women in this study began to set limits, they continued to hope that their

relationships would be saved (Chang, 1996). The younger women were able to move out of

psychologically abusive relationships sooner than the older women but for all of them it was a

wrenching experience. Chang (1996) emphasizes the importance of long-term goals that

"become a strong, active agent in the creation of her own life" (p. 134). She urges those who

work with psychologically abused women or with married women who are depressed, to bear in

mind that it takes longer to recognize psychological abuse because it leaves no visible sign. This

trait makes it easier for both partners to deny. She also recommends that those who work with

couples be cautious regarding the possibility of "hidden psychological abuse" (Chang, 1996).

Leaving as a Process

Anderson & Saunders (2003) compared and contrasted numerous quantitative studies that

examined the stay/leave decisions of abused women as well as qualitative studies that addressed

the process of leaving. According to Anderson & Saunders (2003), "Process studies typically

differ qualitatively from stay/leave studies in conceptualizing leaving as a complex process

involving many decisions and actions taking place over a period of months or years" (p. 172).

According to these studies, leaving begins with changes at the emotional and cognitive levels

well before an actual physical departure and is described as a progression rather than an event.

Outside sources of knowledge caused shifts in their thinking and the women began to examine their relationships and identify the abuse. As women began to recognize the damage done to their psychological well-being, they began to discontinue repressing feelings of anger which further empowered them in searching for a way to exit the relationship. These studies indicated that the act of leaving an abusive relationship does not necessarily alleviate emotional suffering and may actually increase it initially. At the top of the list of emotional issues facing women who separate are "the presence of lingering feelings of attachment and loss around the former intimate partner" and not "qualitatively different from those of other women leaving troubled nonviolent relationships" (Anderson & Saunders, 2003, p. 180).

Experience of Loss

In terms of women's socialization, ongoing feelings of attachment may also be related to the loss of the highly valued role of wife and mother. The loss of the "coupled-identity" and the transition to a new identity may be keenly felt by women who valued the role and may be perceived as a loss of childhood dreams. According to Anderson & Saunders (2003), "In some battered and non-battered women, the identity disruption was so keenly felt, they reported feeling a complete loss of their core selves" (p. 181). Economic losses and changes in family responsibilities also contribute to the struggles women face in leaving abusive relationships. It was found that downward spirals in well-being can take place generating higher levels of stress and "negative mental health consequences if coping resources are not present in sufficient quantities" (Anderson & Saunders, 2003, p. 182).

Coping Resources

Coping resources were found to be both external and internal. External resources that were recognized to be necessary were economic such as income, housing, and material

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possessions for women who separate from intimate partners. Institutional resources in the form

of food stamps, employment training, child care, as well as individual and group therapy may

also contribute to sustaining her independence and developing her resilience. Social support may

be defined as the available social relationships and community contacts that may be called upon

for assistance and resources in time of need. According to Anderson & Saunders (2003), "Also

very important for the battered woman are internal resources such as having confidence in her

ability to exert some measure of control over her immediate environment" (p. 184).

It has been noted that abused women who espoused conservative family values and

religious ideals initially minimized or denied the intensity of the abuse (Anderson & Saunders,

2003). These women framed their circumstances in a way that helped them to cope with the pain

of the abuse while maintaining their commitment to their partner and to the relationship. This

paradigm often isolated these women from external influences that would challenge their

perception of the difficulties they endured while empowering their abusers' definition of the

circumstances. Hubbard (1996) describes the "double bind" in which women find themselves:

> If they withdraw from the relationship, they will have violated their own moral
>
> imperative that forbids them to care for themselves at the cost of the relationship; if they
>
> stay in the relationship, acting to silence and abandon the self, they find themselves
>
> alone, walled away from intimacy and connection in the darkness of their depression (pp.
>
> 146-147).

Abuse of Power

A qualitative study was conducted by Lammers, Ritchie, & Robertson (2005) to examine

the experience of seven women who had undergone emotional abuse in long-term heterosexual

relationships from a feminist perspective. The purpose of the study was to explore the dynamics

and impact of emotional abuse without concurrent physical abuse. The study also looked at how gendered role prescriptions were implicated in these relationships and how the women regained their power either before or after leaving. All of the women had been out of the relationship for more than a year at the time of the study.

Authors Lammers et al. (2005) attest to the limited amount of literature on what they term as "pure" emotional abuse due to the insidious nature of the abuse as well as the likelihood that the abuse may go unrecognized and even deemed socially acceptable in a patriarchal society. According to Lammers et al. (2005), "Patriarchy was originally defined as the supremacy of the father over his family members, but has since come to mean the social system that allows men to rule and dominate women and children in every aspect of life and culture" (p. 32).

These authors suggest that the lack of research on emotional abuse may be attributed to the assumption that its psychological ramifications are less severe than physical and sexual abuse. However, these authors maintain that the effects of emotional abuse are similar to that of physical and sexual abuse. Depression as well as a decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem is seen equally in women who experience abuse that is physical or non-physical in nature (Loring, 1994). The lack of agreement on what constitutes emotional abuse may also contribute to the small amount of literature that exists on this topic according to these authors. Lammers et al. (2005) define emotional abuse in heterosexual relationships as:

> The patterned non-physical degradation of one person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining, regaining, or maintaining of power through the repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages that control or attempt to control, which negatively affects the abused partner's emotions or self-value in the long term (p.31).

This definition emerged as a result of this study and demonstrated that the essence of emotional abuse is the misuse of power.

The seven women who participated in this study were all survivors of emotionally abusive heterosexual relationships. All were Caucasian and ranged from 25-60 years in age. All but two had children during the time that they were emotionally abused which ranged between 3 to 28 years with five of the seven women experiencing abuse between 6 to 11 years. All considered themselves to be lower-middle class and only one had a degree at the time of the study.

The study identified three types of abusive behaviors which men employed to control women. One type of behavior consisted of overt actions such as demands, threats, and criticism. Men that employed these behaviors were categorized as Dominant Controllers. A second type of behavior consisted of silent rejection and emotional neglect to covertly force a subordinate position upon their partner. These men were categorized as Silent Controllers. The third type used subtle means to cause their partners to feel inadequate and to undermine self-confidence. These men were deemed to be Manipulating Controllers (Lammers et al., 2005). It was determined that all three methods were employed at times but that one type was used predominantly.

Two of the women in this study identified themselves as being dominantly controlled, two were manipulatively controlled, and three identified as being silently controlled. All participants experienced depression to varying degrees and stated that they felt emotionally unsupported and lonely as a result. All but one participant reported a decrease in self-esteem. Fear was experienced to the greatest degree by women in the dominantly controlled category and inadequacy by the women in the manipulatively controlled category. The silently controlled

women were most affected by their partners' treatment of them and two experienced acute emotional pain to the degree that they feared for their sanity.

The study found that women became angry as they recognized they had changed in negative ways as a result of their partners' behavior toward them. Their anger enabled them to begin the process of detaching emotionally from the relationship in order to protect themselves. The process of detaching emotionally moved them in the direction of regaining their power and reclaiming their life. For these women, anger at the unjust way that they had been treated was an important step on the path to recovery. Lammers et al. (2005) describe the process of detaching emotionally:

> We found that as long as the women were still emotionally attached to their abusive partners, the men retained an emotional hold over them. However, as the women started to let go of their partners emotionally, their personal power increased. They began to become less dependent on their partners' behavior in order to feel good. Their personal power did not surface until they had disconnected on an emotional level, a process Loring (1994) describes as "disattachment." Loring differentiates disattachment from detachment by saying that detachment connotes an immediate and complete separation, while disattachment designates an ongoing separation process in which a person, after reincorporating her or his formerly fragmented self, breaks away from the emotional abuse process (p. 55).

Emotional disconnection enabled the women to break free from the responsibility of care for the emotional welfare of their partners who behaved in hurtful ways toward them.

The two youngest women had been manipulatively controlled and were unable to take the initiative in leaving the relationship. One of the women who had been dominantly controlled had

not been able to take the initiative either. The authors suggest that women who perceive that they lack either internal or external means sufficient to succeed on their own find it more difficult to leave.

This study found that emotional abuse impacted the women in eight ways: emotional loneliness, despair, guilt, confusion, fear, diminished self-esteem, diminished identity, and anger. The two women in the dominantly controlled group identified their relationships as abusive much earlier than the women in the silently controlled and manipulatively controlled group. The latter two groups believed their partners' actions to be gendered ways of behaving and did not initially recognize them as abusive. However, all felt hurt by these practices and believed that they had been affected in negative ways. It was also found that the older women who had been traditionally socialized to accept gendered expectations of male and female behavior experienced more guilt in their relationships. "In exposing the negative consequence of gendered social practices, this study was able to highlight the negative impact such practices have on women's emotional health" (Lammers et al., 2005, p. 61).

In summary, trauma in attachment relationships lays the foundation for emotional instability, mental impairment, and negative behavioral consequences. It is an unfortunate and ironic phenomenon that trauma increases distress while simultaneously increasing the need for attachment to regulate that distress, thus enhancing the traumatic bond. When relationships do not allow for mutuality, the most profound consequence is a deep sense of disconnection and isolation--the exact feelings that lead to the development of psychological troubles (Herman, 1992; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

In the cultural context of a patriarchal society, those with less power (women) are expected to accommodate those who have more power (men). Although she yearns for it, a

woman in an abusive relationship cannot expect mutuality in her relationship. She may not even identify the legitimacy of her emotional pain and distress when the key figure in her life (her partner) does not acknowledge, resonate, and respond to her experience (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Her relational sense-of-self compels her to persevere in spite of the pain and abuse because she believes that to lose the relationship is to lose something of the self (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Defense of the relationship holds a higher moral imperative than defense of the self (Hubbard, 1996). Learner (1988) states: " When faced with the choice (in fantasy or reality) of sacrificing the self to preserve a relationship, or strengthening the self at the risk of threatening a relationship, women often choose the former" (p. 181).

In this chapter, I have described the psychological trauma of physical and non-physical forms of abuse in attachment relationships. I have reviewed literature attesting to the damaging consequences of non-physical abuse as well as the difficulty women experience in identifying and separating from such abuse. In the following two chapters, I provide a detailed introduction of the two theories that will be used to further examine the experiences of heterosexual women in their attempt to successfully separate from long-term relationships characterized by emotional and psychological abuse.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY

Psychodynamic theories have traditionally emphasized the importance of early relationships in the healthy development of the individual. Relational-cultural theory proposes an understanding of human development as being rooted in relationship and in culture. Human development from a relational-cultural paradigm implies a growing capacity to relate to others in more meaningful and complex ways throughout the life cycle. Therefore mutual engagement leads to a "more complex sense-of-self in more complex relationships to other selves" (Miller, 1991, p. 17). The concept of empowerment has become popular in describing women's development and suggests "the capacity to move or to produce change" and has replaced "the notion of power as dominion, control, or mastery, implying *power over*" (Surrey, 1991a, p. 163). The new concept of empowerment is rather a *power with* and is realized in relationships that are characterized by *mutuality* rather than domination.

The central organizing concept of relational-cultural theory is that people grow and develop in the context of relationship to others. Growth occurs in connection with others when relationships are mutually empathic and mutually empowering. When relationships allow for movement and growth, an individual is able to represent his/her true experience. This authentic representation of thoughts and feelings must also include authentic response to the thoughts and

feelings of the other. This mutual engagement leads each person on to greater knowledge of self and other. Miller & Stiver (1997) state:

> If we have found it disconnecting and dangerous to put forward our feelings and thoughts, we begin to focus on methods of not representing our perceptions and feelings. We start down a path away from knowledge of ourselves and away from a sense of authenticity (p. 55).

Kohut (1978) described empathy as "a fundamental mode of human relatedness, the recognition of the self in the other; it is the accepting, confirming and understanding human echo" (pp. 704-705). In Kohut's model, empathy was unidirectional. Jordan (1991b) maintains that in a relationship characterized by mutual empathy, concern and empathy flow both ways which results "in an intense affirmation of the self and, paradoxically, a transcendence of the self, a sense of the self as part of a larger relational unit" (p. 82). According to Jordan (1991a), "Without empathy, there is no intimacy, no real attainment of an appreciation of the paradox of separateness within connection" (p. 69). Therefore, mutual empathy is the method by which empowerment is realized. Surrey (1991a) states, "The capacity to be moved, to respond, and to move the other represents the fundamental core of relational empowerment" (p. 168).

In this chapter, I describe the basic concepts of the theory in its earliest stages as it was applied to women and psychological development and referred to as self-in-relation theory. I elaborate on what it means to be a "self-in-relation" and the way in which this makes women emotionally vulnerable to depression and low self-esteem. I then move on to discuss the relational-cultural model and its importance in clinical work and in understanding the experience of marginalized and subordinate people groups.

A Relational Sense-of-Self

Self-in-relation theorists hypothesized that the sense-of-self that a woman experiences is a "self-in-relation" and that it develops and defines itself in connection with others (Surrey, 1991b). Surrey (1991b) states:

The values of individuation have permeated our cultural ideals as well as our clinical theories and practice…..The notion of a self-in-relation involves an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development. Further, relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: that is, the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence (p. 53).

This approach to the understanding of women's identity formation and definition of themselves is essential to the understanding of women's experience in abusive relationships. It sheds light on the meanings that they assign to the abuse and to the choices they make (or avoid making) in response to that abuse. According to Hubbard (1996), "Given a relational sense-of-self, women may persevere in the face of pain and abuse because to lose the relationship is to lose something of the self; defense of the relationship holds a higher moral imperative than defense of the individual" (p. 144).

Self-in-relation theory emphasized the importance of making and maintaining relationships to a woman's sense-of-self. Miller (1976) states: "Eventually, for many women the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not as just a loss of relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (p. 83). Thus, the loss of connection with others can become a significant source of depression.

In contrast to object relations theories and interpersonal theories, fundamental characteristics of relational-cultural theory are empathic attunement, understanding others and

being understood by others, as well as contributing to the enhancement of others. When

relationships do not possess these characteristics, the capacity for growth and maturity is

compromised. Psychological development is therefore stunted or harmed resulting in a loss of

self-esteem and a diminishing of the self (Kaplan, 1986).

According to Miller (1976), "Women's sense-of-self becomes organized around being

able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships" (p. 83). In the absence of

relationships that are mutually enhancing, women do not develop self-empathy and learn instead

to attend to the needs of others at the expense of themselves (Lesser & Pope, 2007). According

to Lesser & Pope (2007), "A woman's developmental problems are seen not from failure to

separate, but from difficulties in trying maintain a relationship and a connection while asserting

her own needs or desires" (p. 70).

Disconnection and differentiation from the mother in early childhood has been prescribed

as the ideal for the process of male development. Miller (1991) sees the identification process

between mother and daughter as crucial. Miller (1991) insists that girls are "not seeking the kind

of identity that has been prescribed for boys, but a different kind, one in which one is a 'being-in

relation,' which means developing all of one's self in increasingly complex ways, in increasing

complex relationships" (p. 21). The need to feel recognized and understood by others is essential

to development. According to Surrey (1991b),

> It is equally paramount but not yet emphasized that women all through their lives feel the
>
> need to "understand" the other--indeed desire this as an essential part of their own growth
>
> and development, as an essential part of self-worth and the ability to act. Thus the
>
> hyphenated expression "self-in-relation" implies an evolutionary process of development
>
> through relationship. Such language is used to differentiate this notion from a static self

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construct and to describe an experiential process implying openness, flexibility, and change (p. 59).

Gilligan (1992) describes the psychological dilemma that girls face when moving into adolescence. She depicts it as a struggle to continue saying what they are truly thinking and feeling when it would risk the loss of relationship and when not to do so, would leave them feeling alone with no one knowing what they are experiencing. She depicts the passage into adulthood for girls as requiring disconnection from the self in order to maintain connection with others. Gilligan posits that adult women are socialized to use their voices to hide their inner worlds rather than to explore them in connection with others. This becomes an inner quandary that is felt but often not acknowledged and creates an inner tension and turmoil within the self.

Gilligan (1982) states: "Relationship requires connection. It depends not only on the capacity for empathy or the ability to listen to others and learn their language or take their point of view, but also on having a voice and having a language" (p. xx). As she and others conducted a five year study of girls five to eighteen, they found themselves re-examining psychological theories of development--particularly as it pertains to women. They discovered a type of dissociation that takes place in women's experiences as they move through adolescence into adulthood. Gilligan states:

> While our research provided evidence of girls' resistance to dissociation, it also
> documented the initiation of girls into the psychological divisions that are familiar to
> many women: the coming not to know what one knows, the difficulty in hearing or
> listening to one's voice, the disconnection between mind and body, thoughts and feelings,
> and the use of one's voice to cover rather than to convey one's inner world, so that

relationships no longer provide channels for exploring the connections between one's

inner life and the world of others (p. xxi).

The problems that women experience in development result not from a failure to separate but are

due to the difficulties they encounter in maintaining relational connectedness with others while

also maintaining a differentiated sense-of-self (Miller, 1976).

Implications for Depression

Traditionally women have been nurturers, caregivers, and helpers in relationships and

define themselves in the context of those relationships. Consequently, they may find themselves

emotionally as well as economically dependent on those for whom they give care. Women's

orientation to relationships and their subordination of personal achievement to the care of others

can leave them personally at risk in mid-life. Gilligan (1992) places blame where it belongs and

claims that this is a societal problem and not a problem in women's development. She states:

If mid-life brings an end to relationships, to the sense of connection on which she relies,

as well as to the activities of care through which she judges her worth, then the mourning

that accompanies all life transitions can give way to the melancholia of self-deprecation

and despair. The meaning of mid-life events for a woman thus reflects the interaction

between the structures of her thought and the realities of her life (p. 171).

This sense of connection on which women rely has the potential to leave them profoundly

vulnerable. Freud (1917) recognized the potential impact that a significant relationship could

have upon one's sense-of-self and inner psychic structures. His classical statement, "Thus the

shadow of the object fell upon the ego," dramatically described the impact of a lost or failed

relationship on the sense-of-self (p. 249). According to Flanagan (2008),

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The loss of a significant other, occurring through death or abandonment, or emotional

unavailability, is accompanied by strong feelings of ambivalence. To preserve a positive

image of the other the mourner takes in and identifies with the ego of the abandoned

object and then directs feelings of anger and disappointment toward that internalized

image. Self-reproach and self-punishment become ways of dealing with anger toward the

ambivalently held other, as that anger is now turned against the self (p. 126).

A self-in-relation perspective is essential in understanding depression in women and the

meaning that they assign to such experiences as the loss of an intimate relationship. It is

commonly recognized that twice as many women experience depressive episodes as men. This

frequency of depression in women may well be linked to key aspects of women's psychological

development which makes them more vulnerable to key elements of depression. Vulnerability to

loss, inhibition of anger and self-assertion, and low self-esteem are not only key elements of

depression but are also distortions to key aspects of women's normal development in Western

culture (Kaplan 1986).

When relational qualities are devalued or seen as "dependency," women experience a

disaffirmation of their core self-structure (Kaplan, 1986). According to Kaplan (1986), "As

women in general experience failure or frustration in their attempts at effective connection with

others, they themselves take responsibility for the relational failure, assuming that if they were

'better' they would not have such problems" (p. 237). Further attempts and failures to achieve

emotional connection contribute to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and inhibited self-assertion.

"The pattern of women severely inhibiting their own striving and actions so as to

preserve relational ties emerges over and over again in clinical work with depressed women"

(Kaplan, 1986, p. 237). Women also inhibit their expression of anger in order to preserve

relational ties. Miller (1976) maintains that this leaves them feeling disempowered and constricted and even guilty for feeling angry and further contributes to feelings of low self-esteem. Jack (1991) noted: "The women silence themselves, not because they are dependent and passive, but because they value relationship" (p. 137).

Relational-cultural theory, therefore contributes to our understanding of depression in women and to their increased vulnerability in the experience of relational loss and its concomitant disconfirmation of their relational self-structure. Women's sense of self-worth is closely related to their perception of their ability to make, build, and sustain relationships. Kaplan (1986) states: "The profound sense of responsibility which depressed women take for these failures creates a core sense of their own destructiveness" (p. 238).

When individuals feel threatened with isolation, they will attempt to make connection with those closest to them in any way that seems available. According to Miller (1988), "If a person cannot find ways to change the relationships available to her, she will take the only possible step: attempt to change the person possible to change, herself" (p. 8). The process of keeping more and more of one's experience and one's reaction to one's experience out of connection is referred to as *the central relationship paradox* and is basic to understanding many psychological problems for which individuals seek therapy (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

This process of disconnecting from oneself in order to connect with another occurs in relationships where an unequal power imbalance exists between individuals such as a child/parent relationship. It may also occur in an intimate relationship where one partner holds more power economically or socially than another. Over time this will necessitate a movement away from one's authentic self in order to maintain connection with others. This will require

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keeping more and more of one's true self out of the relationship and preclude the possibility of true connection as well as vital change and growth (Miller, 1988).

Times of empathic failure and disconnection occur in all relationships. When these occurrences are successfully addressed and worked through, it can lead to a greater connection in the relationship and growth in the individuals as they experience themselves as relationally effective (Jordan, 2001). Jordan (2001) maintains: "This leads to relational images that contain expectations of being able to be who one is, of staying connected with self and other people, and of being able to have an effect on relationships" (p. 95).

When a pattern of chronic disconnection occurs however, the individual who commands less power in the relationship may begin to disconnect from her own experience and begin to hide parts of herself or twist the experience to represent what the more powerful individual defines as acceptable. On the surface, the individual feels safer but is acting in ways that are not authentic and will begin to feel "less real, less seen, and less understood" (Jordan, 2001, p. 96). The individual also feels relationally ineffective. Jordan (2001) describes the extreme example of this phenomenon in the case of a child who has experienced abuse by a parental figure and states:

> Thus, the child in this case is confronted with the paradox of connection. While the yearning for connection gets stronger when one experiences early chronic disconnections from caregivers, the fear of the vulnerability needed to connect authentically gets more intense. The person is then caught between the intense yearning for connection and the terror of it (p. 96).

Implications for Therapy

A sense of connectedness to others is necessary for psychological health. Disconnection can create hurt and distress in one's life and become the compelling reason for which many individuals seek psychotherapy. According to Jordan (2001), "Therapy based on the relational-cultural model suggests that the primary work is to bring people back into healing connection, where they begin to reconnect with themselves, and bring themselves more fully into relationship with others" (p. 97). She proposes that the work of therapy is to investigate the meaning that people assign to the connections and disconnections in their life and therefore the expectations that they bring into new and future relationships. Those relational expectations can be examined and changed in therapy through an empathic, healing relationship with a therapist.

According to Cooper & Lesser (2008), "Relational-cultural theory suggests that women are oppressed by the patriarchal social structure where their relational bonds are devalued and labeled as dependent" (p. 126). Relational-cultural theorists recognize that the need to understand and to be understood as the key to psychological health and to fulfillment in relationship with others. Theoretical concepts of this model include:

Mutual Empathy: A way of coming together in relationship that is emotionally open, receptive and responsive to one another and characterized by authentic empathic attunement.

Relationship Authenticity: A way of being in relationship that is meaningful and alive and where one's voice is heard and valued and where one has the freedom to be real without fear of judgment or censure or rejection.

Relationship-Differentiation: A way of pursuing growth and change in one's self as the result of being in relationships that are mutually edifying and sharpening.

Self-Empathy: A way of engaging in relationship that promotes understanding and self-awareness and offers care and comfort to one's self in place of harsh self-judgment (Cooper & Lesser, 2007).

Therefore, the clinical implications of relational-cultural theory make it especially suitable to the therapeutic relationship where people seek help for depression and are looking for ways to be known and understood (Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1991). The empathic attunement of a therapist validates the feelings and experience of the client and begins a process of change facilitating a decrease in self-reproach and self-judgment.

Kaplan (1986) maintains: "Most importantly, women's inner state needs to be understood in terms of its relational meanings and relational goals" (p. 241). She insists that an empathic bond between a client and therapist can provide a corrective experience to the downward spiral of worthlessness and immobility that is characteristic of the depressive cycle in women. In relational therapy, the stance toward the client is one of deep respect. Jordan (2001) describes the following guidelines:

> The primary goal of therapy is to help the patient; the therapist is not there for personal gratification; the therapist has a responsibility to ensure the safety of the patient; all interventions on the part of the therapist should be guided by clinical judgment about what will be of most use to the patient. Mutual empathy is about cognitive-affective engagement in the therapy on the part of the therapist, about working with the impact of the patient on the therapist (p. 98).

Therapeutic authenticity is based on the understanding of the patient and on concern for the impact of what is said to the patient. It is built on an understanding of the relational history of the patient as well as the history of the therapeutic relationship and what would be beneficial

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to the patient. When empathic misattunements occur, the therapist seeks to mend the breach in the relationship and thus model the healthy give and take of relationships. The therapist is moved and affected by the patient and the patient "knows, sees, feels the therapist being empathic (i.e., is empathic with the therapist's empathy)" (Jordan, 2001, p. 99).

Work on shame is an important part of relational therapy. Jordan (2001) defines shame as a "sense of unworthiness to be in connection, an absence of hope that an empathic response will be forthcoming from another person" (p. 100). In order to heal shame, the suffering person must feel that another can respond empathically to the shamed parts of one's self that have been previously kept out of connection due to fear of rejection and judgment. The individual can then begin to develop empathy with self and others and begin to let go of maladaptive ways of relating with others and with self.

Implications of Disconnection on a Societal and Cultural Level

Relational-cultural thinking has expanded to include the developmental needs of people in general--men and women--and understands that all people naturally seek connection to others at the developmental level (Miller, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Jordan (2001) suggests that the work of relational-cultural model exists to expand tactics to repair hurtful disconnections between groups of people in order to promote respect and mutuality along the lines of ethnicity, race, and culture. She maintains that shame exists on a societal level and is not merely an intrapsychic experience but a tool to exercise power over people by silencing and controlling them.

Psychological development and psychological health necessitate connection to others. Disconnection and isolation are understood to be a primary source of suffering and hurt in one's life and the source of much of the pathological symptoms addressed in therapy and treatment

(Jordan, 2001). Relational-cultural theory examines the experience of connection and

disconnection in relationships on a personal level and also on a societal level. Relationships

between dominant and subordinate groups within society reflect many of the same patterns found

in parent/child relationship and in marriages that are not egalitarian in nature. Members of a

particular subordinate group may also feel silenced within a larger society as women in an

intimate partner relationship where one partner holds more power than the other.

Jordan (2001) cites Chin et al. (1993) and states: "At a societal level, people are forced by

judgments, prejudice, and bias by more powerful others into inauthentic connection or are

allowed to bring only certain parts of themselves into connection" (p. 96). This chronic state of

disconnection and marginalization contributes to shame and internalized oppression and further

disconnection at a societal level (Jenkins, 2000). Non-dominant people groups may be silenced

and in a chronic state of disconnection and marginalization by the dominant culture.

Experiences of disconnection within relationships, if unresolved, may overtime result in a

loss of identity, lowered self-esteem, and inability to move forward in growth and development.

Loss of energy, clarity, creativity, and productivity may characterize not only a depressed

individual but a people group as well. Relational-cultural theory depicts the way in which the

resultant psychological suffering may be present on a societal level as well as on a personal level

and impede the forward movement of whole people groups as well as individuals (Miller &

Stiver, 1997). Jordan (2001) states:

> Working to reduce the marginalization of groups is paramount to fostering enhanced
>
> mental health. Listening people into voice, into authenticity, into mutuality involves
>
> respect, deep understanding and an appreciation of the forces that create isolation. This is
>
> at the heart of the healing connection (p. 102).

In the following chapter, I turn to trauma theory which offers a complementary perspective on connection and disconnection. Like relational-cultural theory, trauma theory places great importance on relationships and social interactions. Traumatic experiences engender turmoil and confusion and rob individuals of the emotional safety and meaningful interactions that intimate relationships are designed to provide. Herman (1992) denounces the practice of faulting the woman for not leaving and maintains that prolonged and recurring psychological trauma (as experienced by a woman in a long-term abusive relationship) creates distress and becomes a form of captivity. Herman (1992) maintains that the fundamental experience of psychological trauma is disempowerment and disconnection from others.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAUMA THEORY

In this chapter, I present the core features of trauma theory as they apply to attachment

relationships and the damaging effect of psychological trauma on the sense-of-self that a woman

experiences. I elaborate on the process of what has come to be understood as traumatic bonding

and the way in which psychological trauma makes women emotionally vulnerable to depression

and low self-esteem. I then move on to discuss the process of recovery as it is conceptualized

through the work of Herman (1992) and others.

Damage to the Self

The ego psychologist Erik Erikson was the first to theorize that human development

occurs from birth until death and to emphasize the significant "influence of culture and society

on identity formation" (Berzoff, 2008, p. 100). Erikson (1950) posited that human development

occurred in eight sequential stages. Erikson proposed that these stages needed to be successfully

maneuvered in order to reach one's full potential. The first of these stages was that of basic trust

and was attained through one's relationship with the first caretaker. This first relationship set the

stage for all subsequent relationships and was to provide the child with a sense of safety and

belief in a world in which she could find acceptance and belonging.

According to Herman (1992), "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the

foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized

person loses her basic sense-of-self" (p. 52). Trauma in attachment relationships is therefore especially devastating because it undermines one's sense of safety and "forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy" (Herman, 1992, p. 52). Once these stages of development have been undermined, the traumatized person experiences a diminished sense-of-self.

Shame and doubt give way to guilt and inferiority when a traumatized individual is unable to maintain her sense of separateness (autonomy) and connection in the satisfactory resolution of conflict in an intimate relationship. As the sense-of-self is forfeited in favor of the relationship, initiative and confidence wane and identity is distorted. Isolation replaces intimacy and the traumatized individual experiences an existential despair.

The effects of trauma propel individuals toward withdrawal from relationships as well as intensify the need for relationships. The traumatized individual therefore alternates between hanging on to others and isolating from others. Herman (1992) refers to this as the "dialectic of trauma" and states:

> Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness. Their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear. The identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed (p. 56).

Herman (1992) maintains that reactions to the same event are never identical and that protective factors such as social support and coping skills foster resiliency and set limits on vulnerability. However, feelings of confusion and distrust may be exacerbated if she is invalidated by those to whom she turns for support. The traumatized person is rendered most vulnerable when "the

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person to whom she might ordinarily turn for safety and protection is precisely the source of danger" (p. 63).

Loring (1994) states:

Disruption of connection is the core of emotional abuse, while the struggle to attach is the hallmark of the emotionally abused woman. The typical abuser moves in and out of bonding with the victim, periodically sharing warmth and empathy, then cutting them off with overt and covert abuse (p. 25).

As the abuser projects blame upon the woman for the mistreatment, confusion and shame combine to distort the actual source of culpability. Guilt and blame for the disruption in the relationship is internalized by the woman who struggles to maintain the lost connection. The result is diminished self-esteem and an erosion of her sense-of-self (Loring, 1994). The abuser desires control and not authentic connection and therefore shows little care for his partner or the relationship. The continued erosion of the self makes it impossible for her to separate from the relationship and she feels helpless to act on her own behalf.

Traumatic Bonding

The need for attachment also plays a role in explaining the difficulty a woman experiences in leaving an intimate partner relationship. Allen (2001) states:

From the perspective of traumatic bonding, the explanation of remaining in abusive relationships is quite simple--although extricating oneself from such relationships is anything but. *Abuse escalates distress (e.g., fear), and distress heightens attachment needs.* Given isolation from other sources of support, the individual with heightened attachment needs will turn to the available attachment figure--particularly the individual

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who is in a position of power. Hence escalating abuse abets traumatic bonding. The

greater the fear, the greater the attachment (p. 71).

It is an unfortunate and ironic phenomenon that trauma increases distress while simultaneously

increasing the need for attachment to regulate that distress and thus enhances the traumatic bond.

Loring (1994) compares the emotional bond in an intimate relationship characterized by

abuse to the paradoxical attachment known as *Stockholm syndrome.* In that example, bank

employees were held hostage for six days in Stockholm, Sweden. Some of the hostages testified

for the defense of their captors when the ordeal was over. Alternating terror with kindness

becomes a form of control that creates an emotional bond. This method of control creates an

emotional bond in unequal power relationships that overwhelms the victim and renders her

helpless to free herself.

Traumatic bonding takes place in intimate relationships characterized by physical

battering when the abuse is intermittent and alternates with times of contrition and kindness

(Dutton & Painter, 1981). It occurs in emotionally abusive relationships when intermittent

kindness and connection occasionally interrupt the overall tone of disapproval and degradation.

In an attachment relationship, the traumatic bond is difficult to break because the traumatized

individual finds it difficult to recognize the entrapment or the damage that has been done to her

sense-of-self. Loring (1994) states: "Only when they have developed a more integrated sense of

themselves and reestablished connectedness with other individuals and a supportive community

can they approach that important step" (p. 46).

Herman (1992) believes that "responses to trauma are best understood as a spectrum of

conditions rather than a single disorder" (p. 119). She considers prolonged and recurring trauma

(as in an attachment relationship) as a complex syndrome. Herman (1992) states: "Protracted

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depression is the common finding in virtually all clinical studies of chronically traumatized people. Every aspect of the experience of prolonged trauma works to aggravate depressive symptoms" (p. 94). She proposes the classification of "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" and cautions therapists and mental health professionals to consider the psychopathology of the victim to be the result of the abuse and not an underlying factor.

Emotionally abused individuals are prone to blame themselves for the difficulties that they are experiencing. They fear the loss of the relationship and strive to pacify and please their abusers at the expense of their own legitimate needs and desires. Suppressing these needs and desires further contributes to a loss of connection with self and others (Loring, 1994). Speaking of the emotionally abused woman, Loring (1994) states: "Focused on her own behavior, she is unable to perceive the overall pattern of abuse that underlies all the separate incidents" (p. 54).

Recovery from Psychological Trauma

Herman (1992) posits that recovery from psychological trauma takes place in three stages. The essential undertaking of the first stage is establishing *safety*. Herman describes the work of the second stage as *remembrance and mourning*. The work of the third stage is depicted as *reconnection* with self and with others and with everyday life. She describes these stages as a progression and not to be taken too literally. She refers to them as an "attempt to pose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex" (Herman, 1992, p. 155).

Because the trauma of psychological abuse has taken a sense of control and self-efficacy from her life, it is imperative that these be restored. This may require that medication be prescribed for a time in order that she may gain some control over emotions that have been damaged through prolonged abuse. A decision of whether or not to avail herself of the help of medication should be left in her hands as should all the other decisions that affect her recovery.

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Safety

A sense of safety is essential to the process of recovery. In order to establish a safe environment, she will need to surround herself with caring people on whom she can rely. Herman (1992) states: "In order to take charge of her own self-care, the survivor must painstakingly rebuild the ego functions that are most severely damaged in captivity. She must regain the ability to take initiative, carry out plans, and exercise independent judgment" (p. 166).

Herman (1992) emphasizes the benefit of therapy and the establishment of a therapeutic alliance to aid in the process of recovery. She compares the process to a marathon with the therapist as a coach or a trainer and warns against the fallacy that healing is found in a fast, cathartic cure. She describes the ideal alliance as one that "preserves both autonomy and connection" (p. 174). During this first stage, the woman regains a sense of being able to protect herself and control her emotions as well as learn on whom she can safely rely for support. Herman (1992) states:

> Once a sense of basic safety has been reestablished, the survivor needs the help of others in rebuilding a positive view of the self. The regulation of intimacy and aggression, disrupted by the trauma, must be restored. This requires that others show some tolerance for the survivor's fluctuating need for closeness and distance, and some respect for her attempts to reestablish autonomy and self-control (p. 63).

The help of others will also be invaluable in the process of remembering once a sense of safety has been established. In the presence of a trusted, empathic other, (with whom she feels safe), the traumatized individual can begin processing painful memories and mourning what has been lost as a result of the trauma.

Remembering

The second stage of recovery, remembrance and mourning, continues to empower the woman who enters it in her own time and at her own choice. As she chooses to remember the painful events and to speak of them, the verbal narrative that she supplies becomes a tool for integrating them into her life's story. "The therapist plays the role of a witness and an ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak of the unspeakable. The reconstruction of the trauma places great demands on the courage of both patient and therapist. It requires that both be clear in their purpose and secure in their alliance" (Herman, 1992, p. 175). Herman (1992) insists that emotions must accompany the verbal narrative as the woman reconstructs her story. She sees the presentation of facts without the emotions that accompany those facts as being without "therapeutic effect." As feelings are explored and experienced, the therapist helps the woman to feel safely anchored in the present and maintain the sense of connection that was destroyed as a result of the trauma.

Herman (1992) does not promote the rapid uncovering of traumatic memories if a client has not developed adequate resources to cope with those memories. The question of "why" and of "why me" invariably presents itself as the woman reconstructs the traumatic events of her story. Ultimately, she must come to see that her suffering is undeserved as she seeks to restore meaning and purpose to her life story. Herman (1992) states: "The therapist normalizes the patient's responses, facilitates naming and the use of language, and shares the emotional burden of the trauma" (p. 179). She affirms that the essential principle that underlies the work of therapy is "belief in the restorative power of truth-telling" and that the "goal of recounting the trauma story is integration" (p. 181).

Mourning

According to Herman (1992), "The descent into mourning is at once the most necessary and the most dreaded task of this stage of recovery" (p. 188). She maintains that the act of mourning is one of courage and not of humiliation. She believes that if a woman is unwilling or unable to grieve that she will continue to be disconnected to a very important part of herself and forfeits an essential part of the healing process.

A woman may vacillate between a desire for revenge or compensation or believe that offering unconditional forgiveness may relieve the difficult struggles of this stage in her recovery process. Herman (1992) maintains, "True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution" (p. 190). This rarely happens and the woman must not waste time waiting or hoping for it. Mourning is the only way to honor one's loss and is not dependent on the acknowledgement of the perpetrator (Herman, 1992).

This "descent into mourning" is a difficult time and a comforting friend or therapist can be an invaluable support. The woman can begin to show compassion for herself as she opens herself to the genuine care of another. "The reward of mourning is realized as the survivor sheds her evil, stigmatized identity and dares to hope for new relationships in which she no longer has anything to hide" (Herman, 1992, p. 194).

Reconnection

In the third stage of recovery, the woman continues the process of regaining power in her life. This may involve re-evaluating some of her previous assumptions that left her vulnerable to exploitation in the past. It may involve confrontations or disclosures that her family may find uncomfortable. These confrontations or disclosures may or may not go well but will promote the

process of regaining possession of herself. The process of reconnecting with herself will aid in letting go of her victim identity and assuming her survivor identity.

Herman (1992) states, "From a position of increased power in her present life, the survivor comes to a deeper recognition of her powerlessness in the traumatic situation and thus to a greater recognition of her own adaptive resources" (p. 204). She is also aware of the support that she has received and of the importance of her connection to others. She is learning when trust is appropriate and when it is not. She is regaining autonomy while remaining connected with others and beginning to take the initiative in matters that concern her future as well as regaining confidence in her ability to do so. She is forging a new identity and deeper intimacy in those relationships that have been supportive.

This third stage of recovery may also include involvement in what Herman (1992) refers to as a "survivor mission" or participation in some meaningful social action to help others. This may take the form of advocating for other women who have been abused or some other form of truth-telling. According to Herman (1992), "These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action" (p. 207).

According to Herman (1992), "Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (p. 197). It is believed that those who recover most successfully are those who "discover some meaning in their experience that transcends the limits of personal tragedy" (Herman, 1992, p. 73).

CHAPTER SIX

A COMBINED THEORETICAL APPROACH

In this chapter, I examine and apply the constructs from relational-cultural theory to the

experience of abused women in long-term relationships characterized by emotional and

psychological abuse and their struggle to separate from the relationship. I then do the same with

constructs from trauma theory. Based on this formulation, I offer recommendations for

theoretically informed clinical work. In the final chapter, I analyze the phenomenon in

connection with the theories and put forth a new way of understanding the phenomenon as well

as consider the implications for clinical work with this "at risk" population.

We now turn to the theoretical constructs of relational-cultural theory to further facilitate

our understanding of the effects of verbal and emotional abuse on the psychological functioning

of women in long-term partner relationships. As we attempt to comprehend the experience of an

emotionally abused woman from a developmental perspective or a psychoanalytic viewpoint, we

do so with the understanding that orientation to relationships has formed the central component

of her identity (Gilligan, 1982). The theoretical framework of relational-cultural theory provides

insight into the emotional entrapment of an abusive relationship as well as the path to freedom

and successful separation resolution.

We have already established that traditional theories of development have reflected the

male experience as prescribed by the dominant culture. Therefore, these theories are limited in

their ability to guide us as we attempt to understand the woman's experience and what must be overcome in her thinking to exit the relationship both physically and emotionally. The following theoretical constructs of relational-cultural theory provide insight into the psychological damage done to the basic structures of the self as well as the process of healing as proposed by this theory.

Concept of Self

Relational-cultural theory challenges the concept of self as understood by traditional Western psychologies. The sense-of-self that a woman experiences in an intimate relationship is not a separate or autonomous self but a "self-in-relation" to her partner. She defines herself in the context of this relationship and achieves identity and growth in connection with him and with others to whom she is associated.

A heterosexual woman in an abusive relationship is unable to grow or realize her potential because the relationship is not one that promotes the mutual enhancement of both partners. Her relational sense-of-self compels her to persevere in spite of the pain and abuse because she believes that the loss of the relationship is tantamount to a loss of the self (Gilligan, 1982, Miller, 1976). Defense of the relationship holds a higher moral imperative than defense of the self (Hubbard, 1996).

She withdraws from authentic relationships with others that would challenge the approach that she has adopted in order to preserve the relationship with her partner. Her other affiliations grow progressively more superficial and no longer contribute to her growth. Others are unaware of the captivity she experiences and the ways in which she suffers. The woman herself may be unaware of the extent of her captivity. A woman in a long-term relationship characterized by emotional abuse has lost her voice and is no longer able to speak for the self

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that has been abandoned (Hubbard, 1996). As stated earlier: "The women silence themselves, not because they are dependent and passive, but because they value relationship" (Jack, 1991, p. 137).

The consequences of verbal and emotional abuse are cumulative. Verbal abuse uses words as weapons which are designed to generate fear, guilt, and shame. Emotional abuse is intrinsic in verbal abuse. The principal assault is on the partner's sense-of-self. Self-confidence and self-esteem are diminished over time and the woman becomes confused about what is real and what is true. She may engage in self-blame and turn her anger inward. She becomes depressed as feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness become internalized (Shaffer, 2005). According to Shaffer (2005),

> If the relentless barrage of negative messages from the abuser takes root, one of the fruits produced is increased dependency on the abuser because she believes she is an inadequate, incompetent person. Blaming herself and her deficiencies, she will tend to minimize the abuse, excuse the abuser, and even accept her suffering as what she deserves. What is real and true has faded and lies have taken root (p. 21).

Relationship-Differentiation

Relational-cultural theory suggests that growth occurs within relationship. In relational-cultural theory, *connection* has replaced *self* as the core element of development" (Miller et al., 1991). Relationships are necessary throughout the life span in order for creativity and autonomy to develop. Bowlby (1979) suggests that "human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise" (p. 103).

Relational-cultural theory proposes that as individuals engage in relationships that are mutual, growth and development occur.

In contrast to the model of separation-individuation as the basis of human development, Jordan et al. (1991) propose the concept of relationship-differentiation to describe the developmental process. They define this as "a dynamic process that encompasses increasing levels of complexity, structure, and articulation within the context of human bonds and attachments" (p. 36). Relational-cultural theory proposes that development implies a growing capacity to relate to others in more meaningful and complex ways throughout the life cycle and encourages personal growth through connection with others in relationships that are mutually engaging, mutually empathic, and mutually empowering (Lesser & Pope, 2007). Mutual engagement leads to a "more complex sense-of-self in more complex relationships to other selves" (Miller, 1991, p. 17). Abusive relationships are not mutually engaging and therefore are not conducive to growth and development. An abusive relationship is not one that shifts in order to accommodate the growth and development of the individuals as well as the relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Relational Images and Constructed Meanings

As individuals grow and interact with others, they begin to create within their minds relational images. These images portray the patterns of their relational experiences and become predictors of what future relationships will look like. These images are created out of their experiences of relating to the significant people in their lives and determine their beliefs about themselves and others. When experiences of interaction within significant relationships consistently leave a person feeling ignored or misunderstood, they feel less worthwhile and less eager for connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Individuals also create explanations or reasons why they are unable to connect with others in ways that are meaningful and why they are left feeling isolated and alone. According to Miller & Stiver (1997), the construction of these explanations or meanings "determine our beliefs about ourselves and others in all areas of our lives" (p. 40). These authors also maintain that a significant portion of this practice takes place outside of awareness and creates a framework in which we think and feel and act even when we are alone.

A woman in a long-term abusive relationship has walled off parts of herself because she believes that she cannot bring them into relational connection. Consequently, she believes that she can maintain connection only if she conforms to what her partner wants; if she does not, she will be attacked or abandoned. She has also constructed meanings as to why this is so. She has come to believe that she must be lacking or flawed and that she is the problem. According to Miller & Stiver (1997), "Typically, people who have experienced significant disconnection create meaning that assign blame to themselves. As disconnections recur--and, most important, as people cannot find ways to engage with others about these disconnections--their sense of condemnation intensifies" (p. 77).

Growth in Connection

Authentic connection with others leads to a *desire for more connection*. Miller & Stiver (1997) affirm that growth-fostering interactions lead to the motivation for more connection. This is in contrast to the isolating influence of the abuse that the woman has experienced in her past relationship. These authors state:

Out of the experience of authentic mutually empathic interactions, we acquire the

"feeling-thinking" understanding of ourselves and others that gives us a sense of a

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"knowledgeable" basis for action. Most of us, we believe, would develop more

capacities for action, and ways to be active, if we had optimal mutual relationships

(Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 36).

Mutual empathy occupies an essential function in the application of relational-cultural

theory in the clinical setting as well. When an abused woman moves into authentic connection

with a therapist and with other people in her life, she will find more connection with herself and

her experience (Miller & Stiver, 1997). "Feeling that another person can be with her, she can

bear to see the truth of what happened to her in the past and can become much more empathic

and understanding of herself" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 188).

The ability to develop empathy for one's own experience (self-empathy) grows out of

engagement with another person who is empathic with our experience. Empathic understanding

of ourselves evolves out of the empathy of others and enables us to begin changing relational

images and their meanings. Relational images begin to be created early in life and largely out of

awareness. When these images have been growth-fostering they move us toward more

engagement and deeper connection with others. When an individual experiences chronic

disconnections within important relationships, these disconnections will move them away from

engagement with others and toward disparaging meanings of themselves as ineffective and

undesirable. Miller & Stiver (1997) state: "It is usually the parts of our experience that we feel

we cannot share that make trouble for us, the parts we have walled off because we have been led

to believe that we cannot bring them into relational connection" (p. 41).

Mutual Empathy

In contrast to the unidirectional model of empathy offered by Kohut (1971), Jordan et al.

(1991) maintains that in a relationship characterized by mutual empathy, concern and empathy

flow both ways. Mutual empathy suggests that each partner seek to understand the other. In a relationship characterized by abuse, there is no interest on the part of the abuser to understand the experience of his partner. There is no affirmation of her personhood and no concern for her emotional suffering. The partner, who engages in this style of relating, exploits his wife for his own selfish ends. He violates her dignity and infringes upon her autonomy with the intent of exercising power and control (Shaffer, 2005). The relationship is not emotionally open or responsive and is void of empathic attunement on the part of the abuser.

In a relationship that is mutually empathic, each individual recognizes and "feels moved by" the communication of the other's experience. The sense that she is able to "move another" by the communication of her experience affirms to her that she is "relationally effective." Surrey (1991a) states: "The capacity to be 'moved,' to respond and to 'move' the other represents the fundamental core of relational empowerment" (p. 168). Miller & Stiver (1997) state:

> Mutual empathy is the great unsung human gift. We are all born with the possibility of engaging in it. Out of it flows mutual empowerment. It is something very different from one-way empathy; it is a joining together based on the authentic thoughts and feelings of all participants in a relationship" (p. 29).

Mutual Empowerment

Mutual empowerment replaces the "power-over" model and its motivation to dominate and control. Surrey, (1991a) states: "We have needed a different concept to suggest power with others, that is, power in connection or relational power. Thus we have talked about mutual empowerment (each person is empowered) through relational empowerment (the relationship is empowered)" (p. 163).

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In a relationship characterized by verbal and emotional abuse, one individual refuses to engage in the relationship with good will. The partner's actions are derived from a desire to dominate and to exert power and control by negatively impacting the atmosphere of the relationship. The woman feels regularly disempowered as her repeated attempts to communicate are ignored and ineffective. There are no feelings of safety, significance, or acceptance.

Mutually empowering relationships are incompatible with dominance and subordination. Jack (1991) states:

> Within marriage, where intimate attachment and inequality are mingled, one dimension of relationship--inequality--comes to overshadow the attachment dimension or to alter its meaning. Depressed women detail how they shape their attachment behaviors--their communication, their ways of caring for others, their responsiveness--to correspond with the perimeters set by their position of inequality relative to the partner. From the example set by their own parents, from the wider culture, and from their partners' expectations, women draw the belief that the way to connect to a man is through a sieve of "feminine" behaviors that filters out part of the self (p. 45).

In a relationship that is mutually empowering, neither individual controls or has power over the other. Both individuals are growing in their capacity to be relationally effective and to impact one another in ways that are mutually edifying and enriching. Neither individual is consciously keeping parts of the self out of the relationship. Both individuals are in the process of becoming more of the person that they were created to be.

Miller & Stiver (1997) maintain that mutual empowerment is composed of at least five components which they refer to as "the five good things." They are *zest, action, knowledge, worth,* and *a desire for more connection.* A woman exiting a long-term relationship will

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necessarily experience a wide range of feelings in the process of leaving. If she is able to

authentically express her thoughts and feelings to another person from whom she experiences

care and concern, she will experience an increase in *zest* or energy despite feelings of sadness

and even fear. According to Miller & Stiver (1997), "The feeling of increased vitality and

energy that comes from the sense of connection is the most basic feature of growth-fostering

interactions" (p. 31).

Feeling empowered by the relational interchange, the woman feels more able to take

action in the difficult situations that are before her. The relational interplay is psychologically

growth-fostering rather than diminishing as the interactions in the abusive relationship have

been. She gains increased *knowledge* of herself, her circumstances, and of the emotions that she

is experiencing. Her sense of personal *worth* is augmented in the course of experiencing her

feelings in connection with another and she *desires more connection*. Miller & Stiver (1997)

state: "We cannot develop a sense of worth unless the people important to us convey that they

recognize and acknowledge our experience" (p. 32).

Dialectic of Connection and Disconnection

The experiences of connection and disconnection are central to the understanding of

relational-cultural theory. According to this theory, psychological development as well as

psychological well-being requires connection with others. A woman in an abusive relationship is

compelled by her relational sense-of-self to persist in her attempts to engage in meaningful ways

with her partner. These attempts are not mutual however, and the isolation experienced in an

abusive relationship is a major source of pain and suffering.

Miller & Stiver (1997) define disconnection as "the psychological experience of rupture

that occurs whenever a child or adult is prevented from participating in a mutually empathic and

mutually empowering interaction" (p. 65). Disconnections can be relatively minor as when

others are occasionally unresponsive or major as when an individual is attacked or abused.

Temporary experiences of disconnection are inevitable in all relationships. However, when these

experiences of disconnection are resolved, they lead to further growth of the individuals and

enhancement of the relationship. This is only possible when both individuals are able to

represent their experience in ways that are authentic and meaningful. "In contrast to the five

good things, disconnection ultimately leads to (1) a diminished energy level, (2)

disempowerment or an inability to act, (3) confusion, (4) a diminished sense of worth, and (5)

avoidance of relationships/isolation" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 68).

In a relationships characterized by verbal and emotional abuse, experiences of

disconnection are not resolved in ways that lead to growth. The woman is not able to represent

her actual experience and her suffering goes unacknowledged. She feels isolated and relationally

ineffective (Jordan, 2001). Her partner refuses to respond to her in ways that lead to new and

better connection. Her isolation is experienced as both from the self that has been silenced in

favor of maintaining the relationship as well as from others.

Repeated experiences of disconnection communicate to the woman that her internal

experience must be incorrect or faulty. Unsuccessful attempts to authentically represent her

experience cause her to believe that the problem must lie within her and that she must keep

certain parts of herself out of the relationship. Thus, the process of disconnecting from aspects

of the self is set in motion in an attempt to connect with her partner and a loss of self occurs.

Miller & Stiver (1997) refer to this as the *central relational paradox.* As a woman in a

long-term relationship experiences repeated incidents of disconnection with unsuccessful

attempts at connection, she begins to develop strategies of disconnection to protect the

vulnerable self that is sacrificed in favor of the relationship. However, these strategies of

disconnection prevent the possibility of meaningful and authentic connection as the true self has

been abandoned in favor of the relationship. According to Miller & Stiver (1997),

> This path away from mutual connection, and simultaneously away from the truth of one's
>
> own experience, is the path to psychological problems. We believe it underlies many of
>
> the problems common to women in particular, including depression, various forms of
>
> anxiety, phobias, eating problems, and the so-called personality disorders, such as
>
> "borderline personality" (p. 81)

Shame and Depression

An abused woman in a long-term relationship experiences shame when repeated efforts

to resolve conflict and achieve connection are unsuccessful. Experiences of relational

ineffectiveness leave her feeling confused and unworthy of connection. These painful affects

contribute to her depression and she begins to doubt her ability to make her experience known.

Jack (1991) states:

> Shifting to look at depression from the relational perspective requires a change of focus
>
> from the intrapsychic to the interpersonal, to the quality and nature of attachments. If
>
> relatedness with other is of primary importance, it becomes clear why a person will go to
>
> any lengths, including altering the self, to establish and maintain intimate ties (p. 11).

As an abused woman in a long-term relationship feels hopeless about the possibility of authentic

emotional connection with her partner, she begins to experience despair. Bowlby (1980) states:

"In most forms of depressive disorder, including that of chronic mourning, the principal issue

about which a person feels helpless is his ability to make and to maintain affectional

relationships" (p. 247). Depression is interpersonal from the relational perspective (Jack, 1991).

Jack (1991) suggests that women are especially vulnerable to shame and depression due to their relational sense-of-self and orientation to relationships. She states: "According to the relational point of view, depression arises from the inability to make or sustain supportive, authentic connection with a loved person" (p. 16). This is particularly true of the woman in a long-term abusive relationship.

> Jack (1991) maintains that the loss of self in relationship coincides with a loss of voice:
>
> Voice is an indicator of self. Speaking one's feelings and thoughts is part of creating, maintaining, and recreating one's authentic self. As women fail to hear themselves speak to their partners, they are unable to sustain the convictions of "I" and slip, instead, into self-doubt about the legitimacy of their privately held experiences (p. 32).

Women in long-term abusive relationships are fearful of expressing negative feelings and begin to experience a widening gap between their inner experience and their outward behavior. Her continued attempts to disconnect from herself in order to maintain connection with her partner preclude the possibility of the authentic connection for which she yearns.

Dominance and Subordination

According to Jack (1991), "Missing from most accounts of depression are the entanglements that result when intimacy occurs within a context of inequality. Yet women's experience of adult attachments continually intersects with issues of dominance and subordination" (p. 21). The traditional female role places women in the vulnerable position of caring for others often without receiving support themselves. This is especially so in a culture of inequality. A woman in a heterosexual relationship characterized by abuse is in a difficult predicament. Jack (1991) states:

In a very real sense, a woman goes up against the masculinist culture--physically, economically, morally, and epistemologically--if she questions why her partner "always gets his way." Standing in his position of maleness, her husband or partner has the force of Western civilization behind him, a force that has consistently justified and elevated males while it has correspondingly discounted and demeaned females (p. 33).

Jack (1991) maintains that gender inequality inherent in Western culture "prepares women to abdicate their own perspective and values in order to adopt the prevailing male-oriented view" (p. 33). According to Fleming (1996), "Hierarchicalism in the home is at the core of abusive behavior. There would be no need for abuse if the desire for power and control did not exist" (p. 185).

Societal and Cultural Disconnections

Experiences of disconnection can occur among individuals or among groups of people when one entity has "greater power to define what can and cannot occur within relationships" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 82). Self-disparaging relational images and meanings may be constructed as a result of living in a world where a group of people holds "power over others based on difference in age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors" (Miller & Stiver, 1997 p. 12). According to Miller & Stiver (1997), "Self-disparaging construction thus become the source of profound and continuing internalized oppression (p. 79). This may occur within an individual in an abusive relationship or to an entire people group.

The work of the Stone Center at Wellesley College was further expanded beyond disconnections on an individual level to include disconnections on a societal level (Jenkins, 2000). Jenkins (2000) credits the work of Clevonne Turner (1987) who encouraged awareness of ethnicity on the world views of women of color. Jenkins (2000) states: "In addition, she

affirmed the capacity of what has since become known as relational-cultural theory to represent, validate, and legitimize a significant aspect of African-American women's psychosocial maturational processes" (p. 64). Turner's work "expanded the original perspective of the founding theorists by naming sociocultural issues that lend complexity to the lives of women of color, particularly African-American women" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 64).

Relationships between dominant and subordinate people groups may replicate the experiences of women in abusive relationships. Just as an individual may feel that she is unable to authentically represent her experience in an intimate relationship with a partner who holds more power, members of marginalized groups may feel silenced and unacknowledged within the society which oppresses them.

Although relational-cultural theory originally focused on the psychological development of women and the psychological suffering that is incurred as a result of repeated and unacknowledged disconnection, it has been expanded to include societal oppression. Miller & Stiver (1997) state: "All forms of oppression are also relational oppression; they act against mutual relationships and therefore create major disconnections between people who come from different groups" (p. 49). These authors suggest that psychotherapy "must focus on understanding the sources of disconnection and finding the ways to move from disconnection to connection--connection that is mutually empowering" (p.121).

Theoretical Constructs from Trauma Theory

This thesis asks the question: "What makes it possible for a heterosexual woman to overcome the effects of traumatic attachment in exiting a long-term intimate partner relationship characterized by emotional and psychological abuse?" The following theoretical constructs of trauma theory provide insight into the damage of emotional abuse and the consequent emotional

entrapment. After examining the effects of abuse, we turn our attention to the process of recovery using the same lens.

Damage to the Self

The use of verbal and emotional abuse to exercise power and control over another person is demeaning and shaming. It seeks to diminish the victim while elevating the abuser. The effects of this type of prolonged abuse in an attachment relationship are pervasive and become a source of on-going trauma. Damage is done to the basic structures of the self and leaves the victim feeling stunned, wounded, and constantly on guard.

Negative effects upon the self include: feelings of insecurity, powerlessness, emotional loneliness (loss of connection with the self and others), diminished self-confidence and self-esteem, depression (feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness), and heightened attachment needs. Loring (1994) states: "Fear and terror render the emotionally abused woman incapable of detaching herself from the relationship with the abuser for she has no separate and cohesive self to detach" (p. 45). She experiences a "loss of self" and feels powerless to change her situation and unable to act on her own behalf. She is incapable of escape as long as maintaining the relationship takes precedence over care for the self.

Feelings of Insecurity (Loss of a Sense of Safety)

A sense of safety or basic trust is acquired early in life with an individual's first caretakers. This sense of safety and trust becomes the basis of all future relationships. It shapes an individual's relationship with herself as well as with others. It enables an individual to experience herself as a person of value and worth with the ability to affect others in a positive way. In a long-term relationship characterized by abuse, a woman loses her sense of safety and security.

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Trauma in attachment relationships lays the foundation for emotional instability because attachment-related trauma not only engenders distress but also undermines the capacity for the regulation of that distress. The unpredictability and uncontrollability of an attack leaves her feeling vulnerable and insecure. Over time she begins to doubt her ability to influence the relationship in a positive way and she begins to lose hope.

Traumatic experiences create turmoil and confusion and rob individuals of the emotional safety and meaningful interactions that attachment relationships are designed to provide. The capacity to tolerate affects or feeling states such as sadness, anxiety, depression, or elation without over-controlling or under-controlling one's emotions is a major developmental task of the ego (Goldstein, 1984). A woman who has been subjected to emotional abuse in a long-term relationship will find it difficult to maintain affect regulation and control of her feelings and impulses in a healthy way.

When the need to care for the relationship supersedes her need to care for herself, she uses denial to defend against the truth of her circumstances in order to maintain the relationship. She suffers from feelings of insecurity and self-blame. The abuser's degrading and demeaning comments diminish her sense-of-self and the prolonged captivity creates change in her identity. Self-efficacy is diminished and she does not perceive that she is able to act in ways that would change the situation. As stated earlier, "What is real and true has faded and lies has taken root" (Shaffer, 2005, p. 21).

Powerlessness (Loss of Self-Efficacy)

The persisting inability to change her situation combined with the abusers words and attitude undermines her sense of self-efficacy. She no longer feels that she is in control of her life and her decisions. As she loses her motivation to act on her own, she is unable to take the

initiative she needs to either end the relationship or to pursue outside help. As initiative wanes, it is replaced by shame and the victim of abuse in a long-term relationship begins to lose purpose and direction in her life. This absence of purpose robs her of a sense of meaning and significance and makes her feel inferior and incompetent.

Emotional Loneliness (Loss of Connection with Self and Others)

Loneliness is the constant companion of the woman who finds herself in an attachment relationship characterized by emotional and psychological abuse. According to Jantz (1995), "Loneliness is a lack of true connection" (p. 157). He maintains that emotional abuse hampers one's ability to establish meaningful connections both with self and with others.

Unmet needs for approval and validation drive perfectionist tendencies. The partner in a long-term abusive attachment relationship finds she is working harder and harder to gain approval and avoid rejection. This desire for approval may be occasionally met only to be later withdrawn causing further emotional pain and renewed striving for approval and connection.

Research indicates that the effects of non-physical abuse can be equally if not more devastating than the effects of physical abuse. Physical and sexual abuse rarely occur without the accompaniment of some form of verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse. Psychological abuse may generate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in women whose intimate partner relationships are characterized by this form of non-physical abuse (MacKinnon, 2008).

Loss of Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

According to Goldstein (1984), "The degree to which one feels competent originates early in childhood as a function of one's innate abilities, one's mastery of developmental tasks, and the appropriate feedback of significant others in the environment" (p 68). When feedback from a partner in an intimate relationship regularly tears one down, self-esteem is diminished.

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Decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem are the natural by-product of emotional abuse in a long-term relationship.

Goldstein (1984) states: "The gradual accrual of a sense of mastery or competence becomes a crucial part of self-confidence in dealing with the world and thus becomes an important aspect of identity or sense-of-self" (p. 69). This concept of mastery encompasses the ability to meet challenges. Healthy coping mechanisms involve mastery and the use of internal and external resources to develop solutions to problems (Herman, 1992). Inability to change her relationship for the better diminishes her self-confidence and erodes her self-esteem. She learns to cope with stressful situations in ways that are maladaptive. Defensive functioning is compromised; poor reality testing and denial of the truth become entrenched patterns of behavior.

Depression

Loss of self-esteem engenders feelings of worthlessness and helplessness and contributes to depression. People with low self-esteem constantly defer to others and do not consider their own viewpoints as having validity with those of others. In a long-term relationship characterized by emotional abuse, the victim comes to believe her abusers estimation of her. The abused partner becomes linked (connected) to the abuser with fetters of doubt and fear. She remains in fear of the abuser and in doubt of her capability to function without him (Jantz, 2009).

Self-confidence allows for small setbacks and failures which do not threaten an individual's worth and value as a person. A positive sense-of-self makes it possible to take risks and continue to believe in one's ability to learn and grow. A person who has experienced attachment-related trauma for an extended period of time loses self-confidence and becomes depressed. She finds it difficult to make decisions and avoids challenging herself for fear of

failure. According to Mackinnon (2008), "Even women who have not experienced prior abuse, and enter a relationship with their confidence intact, will experience severe physical and psychological effects if they remain in the relationship with a partner who is psychologically abusive (p. 6).

Heightened Attachment Needs

The intimacy that she seeks to create in the relationship leaves her feeling isolated and alone because the desire for intimacy is not mutually shared. The abuser seeks to control and not to connect. Her love and her care are not reciprocated and she works harder and harder believing that the fault lies within her.

Silence and secrecy are the natural result of the shame she feels concerning herself and her relationship and becomes a wall that separates her from others. This lack of meaningful connection with others creates loneliness and further heightens her attachment needs. This exacerbates the pathological attachment to the abuser who is occasionally comforting. An individual who is chronically abused in an attachment relationship experiences a great deal of inner turmoil and confusion. Isolation from other sources of support creates an emotional captivity. The traumatic bond holds the individual captive in the relationship because her attachment needs bind her to her abuser. The traumatized individual is an emotional hostage, feeling helpless and overwhelmed (Loring 1994).

Stages of Recovery

Herman (1992) maintains that restoring control to the abused individual is the fundamental principal of recovery. She posits that the fundamental experience of psychological trauma is disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery must include the empowerment of the victim and the formation of new connections (Herman, 1992). The

following theoretical constructs of trauma theory provide insight into the process of recovery from psychological abuse and the pathway to freedom from emotional captivity: establishing safety, exploration of traumatic memories (remembering), mourning the loss created by the abuse, and reconnection with the self and with others.

Establishing Safety

Establishing safety begins with the process of understanding and accepting the truth about her relationship and identifying the fact that she is being abused. This process may be initiated by something as simple as discovering a book on verbal abuse. Validation of her experience will continue as she gives words to her experience in the context of a relationship with a trusted friend or therapist. Recovery does not take place in isolation but must occur in connection with others.

An atmosphere of safety must be established in order to process feelings of anxiety, despair, loneliness, and depression. Emotionally abused persons rarely perceive themselves as maltreated and usually seek therapy for depression, anxiety, or relationship issues (Sable, 1999). It may require time for symptoms of emotional abuse to surface in the context of a therapeutic alliance between the client and therapist. According to Sable (1999), "When the client is ready, it is essential that a condition of emotional abuse be identified and labeled" (p. 60). This will give words to the client's experience as well as her inability to resolve the relationship (Loring, 1994).

As the experience of emotional and psychological trauma is validated in the setting of a secure relationship with a therapist or friend, the abused individual begins to surrender her defense mechanisms of denial and minimization of the abuse. Guilt and self-blame begin to diminish as the abused individual is able to conceptualize her experience as abuse and

understand its effect on her perceptions and cognition. As her ability to tolerate the difficult emotions that accompany acceptance of the truth emerges, she will be able to enter the second stage of recovery which calls into remembrance the painful experiences that have led to her emotional captivity (Goldstein, 1999).

Remembrance and Mourning

According to Herman (1992), "All the classic writings ultimately recognize the necessity of mourning and reconstruction in the resolution of traumatic life events. Failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction" (p. 69). The help of empathic others assists in the process of reintegrating "dissociated networks by consciously processing traumatic memories" (Cozolino, 2006, p. 32). Traumatic experiences that are not acknowledged cannot be alleviated. When feelings of anxiety and depression can be clearly linked to experiences of abuse, those feelings are deemed to be valid and the abused individual begins to feel less confused and more hopeful. When bewildering and troubling experiences are recognized as abusive behavior in the context of a safe and caring relationship, emotionally abused clients recognize that abusive treatment is not a necessary cost of connection (Sable, 1999).

As a heterosexual woman in a long-term attachment relationship begins to assess her relationship from a perspective of how devaluing and demeaning her partner has behaved toward her, she is more prepared to complete the grieving process, accept her loss, and exit the relationship. Acknowledgement of the truth in regard to the relationship is necessary in order to free her from the emotional entrapment of the relationship and loyalty to her abuser. If she denies the reality of the abuse, she remains disempowered and pathologically attached to her abuser and unable to act on her own behalf.

Reconnection

By the third stage of recovery, the woman has recognized the abusive nature of the relationship that she sought to preserve for so long. She has begun to trust her ability to care for herself and has taken the initiative in matters that affect her future. As her self-efficacy is restored, her self-confidence begins to emerge. She begins to feel competent and is developing a new identity. She is regaining her capacity to discern when it is appropriate to trust and when it is not. As she regains her autonomy, her sense-of-self is restored and authentic connection with others is established. Her capacity for true intimacy in relationships that are mutual is growing and she experiences an ever increasing desire to invest in the lives of others. She understands that the lessons that she has learned from the difficulties of the past have strengthened her character and fit her for her future meaningful work.

Herman (1992) suggests that in the third stage of recovery, the individual may wish to take the initiative in confronting her abuser. Herman (1992) suggests that in so doing, the burden of shame, guilt, and responsibility is placed on the abuser where it belongs. This is done "without need for confirmation and without fear of consequences" (p. 200). The woman who chooses to confront her abuser will find it empowering for she will no longer feel herself confined by silence and secrecy. She must however, guard her expectations of the outcome. Herman (1992) states: "The power of the disclosure rests in the act of telling the truth; how the family responds is immaterial" (p. 200). For a woman exiting a long-term partner relationship, this may be an important step in shedding her victim identity and gaining a healthy admiration of herself. She is no longer ruled by fear but in possession of herself and empowered by the truth.

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Resolution of Trauma

Herman (1992) draws upon the work of psychologist Mary Harvey (1996) to delineate seven decisive factors by which to measure the resolution of trauma:

First, the physiological symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have been brought within manageable limits. Second, the person is able to bear the feelings associated with traumatic memories. Third, the person has authority over her memories; she can elect both to remember the trauma and put the memory aside. Fourth, the memory of the traumatic event(s) is a coherent narrative, linked with feeling. Fifth, the person's damaged self-esteem has been restored. Sixth, the person's important relationships have been reestablished. Seventh, and finally, the person has constructed a coherent system of meaning and belief that encompasses the story of the trauma (p. 213).

These criteria guide our understanding of the effects of traumatic attachment and what must be overcome in order to emotionally exit an abusive relationship.

Herman (1992) maintains that trauma is redeemed when it "becomes the source of a survivor mission" (p. 207). According to Herman (1992), "The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself. She has some understanding of the person she used to be and of the damage done to that person…..Her task now is to become the person she wants to be" (p. 202). A woman who has survived the tragic failure of a long-term marriage can offer hope and help to others who may erroneously believe that they cannot. The meaning of her personal tragedy is transformed as she is able to impart to others the knowledge and wisdom that she has gained and witness their personal empowerment and reconnection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I begin by reviewing the phenomenon of abuse in intimate partner relationships. The discussion that follows focuses on the traumatic bond that occurs when intermittent abuse and a power imbalance characterize heterosexual relationships. I restate the basic concepts of relational-cultural theory and the ways in which a woman's orientation to relationships increase her vulnerability to traumatic bonding. I recap the ways in which trauma theory adds its own lens to the psychological captivity created when abuse occurs in an intimate partner relationship. I then describe the path of recovery and successful separation resolution as offered by the literature and principles from relational-cultural theory and trauma theory. I develop my analysis of how these theories combine or synthesize to offer real answers to the phenomenon of how women successfully exit long-term relationships. I do this while delineating the turning points suggested by the empirical studies on separation resolution included in this research. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of my approach, I consider the implications of this research in clinical work with women who have been abused in long-term relationships. I emphasize the rich potential of relational-cultural therapy in therapeutic work with women in general as well its application to marginalized populations and offer some concluding thoughts.

As previously stated, studies show that interpersonal violence is an extensive problem that often remains concealed with as many as one in five women experiencing some kind of abuse in an intimate relationship (Hegarty et al., 2008). According to James & MacKinnon (2010), "Unlike physical abuse, non-physical abuse leaves no physical injury, is often not a discrete event, and may easily be confused with conflict. Moreover, symptoms of depression, anxiety, confusion, and low self-esteem, may result from either current or past abuse or both, and individuals with these symptoms may not perceive themselves as being abused" (p. 125). Studies also show that women find it difficult to identify their experience as abuse if they have been exposed to violence in some form or other since childhood (Hegarty et al., 2008). This is particularly so if the violence has been non-physical in nature.

Trauma in attachment relationships lays the foundation for emotional instability, mental impairment, and negative behavioral consequences. It is an unfortunate and ironic phenomenon that trauma increases distress while simultaneously increasing the need for attachment to regulate that distress, thus enhancing the traumatic bond. Allen (2001) maintains that abuse exploits the need for attachment and makes it more difficult to leave:

> From the perspective of traumatic bonding, the explanation of remaining in abusive relationships is quite simple--although extricating oneself from such relationships is anything but. *Abuse escalates distress (e.g., fear), and distress heightens attachment needs.* Given isolation from other sources of support, the individual with heightened attachment needs will turn to the available attachment figure--particularly the individual who is in a position of power. Hence, escalating abuse abets traumatic bonding. The greater the fear, the greater the attachment (p. 71).

The central organizing concept of relational-cultural theory is that people grow and develop in the context of relationship to others. Growth occurs in connection with others when relationships are mutually empathic and mutually empowering. When relationships do not allow for mutuality, the most profound consequence is a deep sense of disconnection and isolation--the exact feelings that lead to the development of psychological troubles (Herman, 1992; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

In the cultural context of a patriarchal society, those with less power (women) are expected to accommodate those who have more power (men). Although she yearns for it, a woman in an abusive relationship cannot expect mutuality in her relationship. She may not even identify the legitimacy of her emotional pain and distress when the key figure in her life (her partner) does not "acknowledge, resonate, and respond to her experience" (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Her relational sense-of-self compels her to persevere in spite of the pain and abuse because to lose the relationship is to lose something of the self (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Defense of the relationship holds a higher moral imperative than defense of the self (Hubbard, 1996). Learner (1988) states: "When faced with the choice (in fantasy or reality) of sacrificing the self to preserve a relationship, or strengthening the self at the risk of threatening a relationship, women often choose the former" (p. 181).

Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Miller & Stiver (1997) describe the experience of the abused woman:

> The more they are mistreated the more worthless and ashamed they feel and the more they withdraw from other people. Not only does a batterer often actively insist on keeping the woman isolated, she herself creates over time constructions about her own unworthiness and augments her own isolation (p. 81).

Traumatic experiences engender turmoil and confusion and rob individuals of the emotional safety and meaningful interactions that intimate relationships are designed to provide. Herman (1992) denounces the practice of faulting the woman for not leaving and maintains that prolonged and recurring psychological trauma (as experienced by a woman in a long-term abusive relationship) creates distress and becomes a form of captivity.

Herman (1992) maintains that the fundamental experience of psychological trauma is disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery must include the empowerment of the victim and the formation of new connections (Herman, 1992). Therefore, restoring control to the abused individual is the beginning principal of recovery. Pressure from friends, loved ones, or her therapist to exit the relationship will rob the woman of the responsibility of making the decision on her own and hamper her recovery and lengthen her healing process.

Herman (1992) maintains that although she is not responsible for the abuse, embracing responsibility for her recovery becomes an empowering force in a woman's life. According to Herman (1992), "The only way that the survivor can take full control of her recovery is to take full responsibility for it. The only way that she can discover her undestroyed strengths is to use them to their fullest" (p. 192).

Analysis

The analysis of the literature addressing the psychological impact of interpersonal violence on women confirms the difficulty a woman experiences in the process of leaving an abusive relationship. Psychological factors such as valuing relationship, traumatic attachment, and lowered self-esteem make it difficult for a woman to leave an abusive relationship. Situational factors such as financial considerations, lack of social support, and childcare needs contribute to the difficulty a woman experiences in successfully exiting an intimate partner

relationship. It is also evident that women experience a multitude of internal obstacles and that those who successfully exit do so as a process rather than as an event and with the help and support of others (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

Several factors combine and contribute to the process of successful separation resolution from a long-term relationship. Empirical studies examined in this paper indicated that it was necessary that outside sources of knowledge be introduced in order for many women to begin to question their perception of their relationship as abusive. Sudden or gradual shifts in their thinking began to take place as women were able to break free from societal programming and begin to care for themselves. Relational psychotherapy as well as authentic relationships with other women contributed to these shifts. As women became empowered by their knowledge and personal insight, they began to set limits and establish personal boundaries as they recognized the true nature of their relationship. As insight increased, women stopped repressing feelings of anger which further empowered them to begin detaching from their partners.

As the women started to let go of their partners emotionally, their personal power increased. They began to become less reliant on their partners in order to feel good. Personal power did not surface until they had disconnected on an emotional level (Loring, 1994). External support was essential at this point in the process. It was necessary that someone else recognize their experience as abuse and join with them. Authentic connection with others helped the women continue to find connection with the reality of their own experience. Miller & Stiver, (1997) state: "Feeling that another person can be with her, she can bear to see the truth of what happened to her in the past and can become much more empathic and understanding of herself" (p. 188).

As women began to recognize the damage done to their psychological well-being (sense-of-self), and discontinued repressing feelings of anger, they were empowered in their search for ways to exit the relationship. A process of reframing and redefining began to take place as women viewed themselves as victims and their relationships as abusive (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Additional shifts in their thinking developed as women identified the abuse and began to make changes. Long-term goals were also found to be active forces moving women forward increasing their sense of personal agency.

Studies indicated that the act of leaving an abusive relationship does not necessarily alleviate emotional suffering and may actually increase it initially. The initial increase in emotional pain experienced by the woman in the process of exiting may be difficult for those around her to understand given the suffering she experienced in the abusive relationship. This aspect of her journey may be the most difficult for her to navigate if she feels alone and misunderstood. This may also be the time in which she is most vulnerable to return. Friends and family that provide emotional support and authentic connection are found to be great allies in warding off depression and in aiding the process of successful separation resolution.

Although women exit their relationships with an eroded sense-of-self, feelings of accomplishment in their ability to do so begin to foster feelings of self-efficacy. This contributes to an increased sense of self-worth as women begin to establish an internal locus of control in their ability to offer care to themselves. Their resolve to leave and establish autonomy apart from an abusive partner continues to empower them.

Relational-cultural theory teaches that when individuals experience numerous disconnections in their interactions with significant people in their life, these disconnections lead them away from engagement with others and toward isolation. Self-blaming meanings are

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constructed by women in relationships with partners who fail to respond to their experience.

Miller & Stiver (1997) state:

> Certainly, one incident with a spouse does not lead to serious psychological problems, but repeated experiences of disconnection can, especially if one is not able to find a way to change the course of the interaction. We have seen many women whose depressions, anxiety states, phobias, and other problems are clearly related to current relationships-- women whose depression and other symptoms reflect deep disappointments in current relationships much more than they reflect failures in their early relationships with their mothers, as traditional theory would have it (p.80).

Miller & Stiver (1997) maintain that that if a woman is able to alter the relationship, these symptoms diminish and a transformation takes place in her sense-of-self or "way of being." A similar improvement occurs if she can find "other connections that empower her to take action and leave the destructive situation" (p. 80). This empowerment is the result of new and authentic connections in which she can allow herself to see the truth of what happened to her in the past. When an individual encounters a relationship in which another person resonates with significant aspects of her experience, the desire for more positive relational opportunities begins to move her along new pathways (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Herman (1992) maintains that resolution of psychological trauma is never complete. She affirms that the best indications of resolution are her ability to focus on the present and future rather than the past, to approach life with anticipation rather than fear, and "to take pleasure in her life and to engage fully in relationships with others" (p. 212). Miller & Stiver (1997) state:

> In the end, finding one's own path to connection leads to a sense of larger community. As we come to know the truth of our own very particular experience of disconnection, we

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can come to know how we all suffer from the forces of disconnection. This sense of

shared experience leads many people to want to work to change the conditions that create

damaging disconnections in the world (p. 188).

This corresponds to the "survivor mission" which Herman (1992) describes as a healing force in

recovery from psychological trauma. Women use their own stories as gifts of encouragement to

others. This further contributes to recovery from emotional and psychological abuse. Herman

(1992) quotes Sarah Buel, a survivor of abuse:

> I want women to have some sense of hope, because I can just remember how terrifying it
>
> was not to have any hope--the days that I felt there was no way out. I feel very much like
>
> that's part of my mission, part of why God didn't allow me to die in that marriage, so that
>
> I could talk openly and publicly--and it's taken me so many years to be able to do it--
>
> about having been battered (p. 209).

Strengths and Limitations of the Approach

Several references have been made to attachment as I have considered the phenomenon

of trauma in attachment relationships. I am aware that not all of my readers may be familiar with

attachment theory and how this may have served to limit their understanding of some of the

concepts that have been addressed in this research. An exposition of attachment theory would

have contributed to a richer appreciation of the emotional distress experienced by a woman

exiting a long-term relationship. Neuroscience now adds its own lens to the amazing capacity of

the brain to change as a result of new attachment experiences and suggests that psychotherapy

can be such an experience. A discussion of recent advances in neuroscience would have

contributed to this research as well.

According to Allen (2001), "The prescription for trauma is simple: talk about it. Simple, *but difficult.* The survivor must tell the story to a trusted confidant who bears witness" (p. 324). Allen (2001) maintains that this involves fostering narrative capacity rather than revealing or exposing any particular narrative content. Narrative therapy has been used successfully to assist clients to re-story their lives in a more positive and functional way. An exposition of narrative therapy in this research would have contributed another lens and provided additional suggestions for therapeutic work with women exiting long-term abusive relationships.

This research focused on the emotional and psychological variables that make it difficult for a woman to leave a long-term relationship. This is not to suggest that situational factors such as economic instability are not important contributors to successful separation resolution. Situational factors such as social support also affect emotional and psychological variables. Future research might explore how situational factors impact these variables and affect failure to successfully separate. Furthermore, a study which examined the ways in which children affect a woman's decision to stay/leave would be an important psychological piece to examine. One study examined in this research established that women leave for the sake of the children. However, none of the studies attempted to measure the psychological hold that it is created by an unwillingness to disrupt family connections and how that impacts stay/leave decisions.

Judith Herman developed much of her thinking in regard to the psychological effects of trauma as a result of the work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center. I believe that relational-cultural theory was a natural progression in addressing the question that this research put forward. As stated earlier, "a work in progress" is a very appropriate paradigm in thinking about both theory and our methods of obtaining answers to our vital questions. Further research and different lenses will always be needed in the social sciences where

empirical research struggles to create studies to measure intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences and develop methods to help people who suffer from relational wounds that are difficult to diagnose and more difficult to treat.

Implications of Trauma and Relational-Cultural Theory in Clinical Work

Miller & Stiver (1997) affirm that the path "away from mutual connection, and simultaneously away from the truth of one's experience, is the path to psychological problems" (p.81). When a woman is emotionally abused in a long-term relationship, she is psychologically violated and unable to represent the truth of her experience in that relationship. Intense efforts to maintain authentic relationship are ineffective because power differentials and a lack of mutuality negate her experience when it conflicts with her partner's expectations and desires. She continues to seek connection while keeping more and more of her true experience and reactions to that experience out of the relationship in order to protect the vulnerable self. This is referred to as the central relational paradox and basic to the understanding of the psychological problems experienced by the abused woman.

Relational-cultural therapists believe that most of the problems that individuals bring to therapy are reflections of the central relational paradox. Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, self-destructive behaviors, and dissociative states may reflect attempts to keep one's experience out of relationship while hiding deep yearnings for connection. Therapy must focus on understanding sources of disconnection and moving people toward more authentic connections that are mutually empathic and mutually empowering. In the shelter of a safe therapeutic alliance, a woman can explore the painful memories and mourn the failure of the relationship and the loss she has experienced. The process of mourning allows the woman to let go of the past and begin to consider the possibility of a new life beyond the end of her relationship. In the

safety of a mutually empathic alliance with a therapist, a woman can become empathic with the truth of her own experience and consequently with herself.

Relational-cultural therapy has moved away from the concept of the blank screen. Miller & Stiver (1997) state:

> We believe that a genuine relational context provides the necessary *safety* and a conducive setting for both patient and therapist to become increasingly aware of the representations of these old relational images as they are expressed in the transference--and to begin to modify these old experiences about relationships (p. 139).

Relational images are formed early in life and often out of awareness as are the constructed meanings that explain those images. However, an individual's relational images can be transformed in authentic connection thus changing her convictions about herself and the possibilities open to her. As stated earlier, when an individual encounters a relationship in which another person be empathic with vital "aspects of their experience, the hope for more positive relational opportunities begins to move them along a new pathway" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p.103). Psychotherapy is one such pathway. Other types of growth-fostering relationships can also pave the way to new relational images and meanings. It is in relationship with others that are mutually engaging and mutually enhancing that the woman creates relational images and meanings that provide a sense of worth. Miller & Stiver (1997) speak eloquently of the possibilities of relational-cultural therapy:

> People often enter therapy believing that their feelings have no legitimacy and that no other person will ever be able to participate with them in their inner emotional life. In therapy they can change this belief. We believe that the work of therapy is to discover how to find the paths toward movement in relationship. This means that the patient

moves toward creating new relational images and meanings, meanings that can include more and more of the full and complex truth of her experience. She moves toward seeing the possibility that a relationship can include all of one's complicated mixture of feeling-thoughts, positive and negative, rational and irrational. She can feel and think about the feelings and sort them out in the process of experiencing them with another person. Experiencing them with another person is what she did not have the chance to do before (p. 131).

The traditional psychodynamic model views intrapsychic fragmentation as the source of mental and emotional distress. Relational-cultural theorists view disconnections as the primary source of human suffering and emphasize the interpersonal over the intrapersonal. Relational-cultural therapy seeks to address the sources of these disconnections in order to move people from psychological isolation toward improved relational functioning. When disconnections are exacerbated by prolonged and patterned abuses of power, these abuses must be identified, exposed, and dismantled in order for people to heal and move forward. Therefore, relational-cultural therapy has implications for addressing all abuse of power, whether, interpersonal, familial, institutional, or cultural and societal (Walker, 2004).

Concluding Thoughts

This research hypothesized that women find it difficult to leave abusive relationships because they fear that the loss of the relationship will result in a loss of self. They stay because they believe that to lose the relationship is to lose something of their essential self. This study confirmed the hypothesis but demonstrated that this belief is a false supposition and that the reverse is true. *When women remain in abusive relationships in an attempt to preserve the relationship, they suffer a loss of self.*

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As I offer my concluding thoughts, I am impressed by the need to repeat the caution of Judith Herman (1992) in regard to imposing simplicity upon a process that is inherently complicated and indescribably painful. I wish to avoid any hint of glibness or in any way minimize a process that is deeply painful and agonizingly difficult. I am also impressed to remind my readers of the quote by Jean Baker Miller (1976) who affirms that "for many women the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not as just a loss of relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (p. 83). However, I believe that this research proves that if the experience of exiting the relationship is understood as a journey and not as a destination, women can gain the courage to complete the process and view it as a passageway into more authentic (true) connection both with themselves and with others.

Neborsky (2006) states: "Attachment failures lead to unprocessed feelings of unregulated grief, which, without the empathic other, create unbearable states of aloneness that can only be regulated with defenses" (p. 527). Miller & Stiver (1997) define these attachment failures or "disconnections" as painful psychological experiences that occur when a person is prevented from experiencing mutually empathic interactions and maintain that repeated disconnections in important relationships can have profoundly negative consequences. These authors insist that healthy relationships are the source of psychological well-being (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Herman (1992) maintains that recovery from psychological trauma is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. It is in authentic connection with others that individuals experience healing and empowerment as positive relational opportunities begin to move them along new pathways. Overcoming the effects of traumatic attachment is a healing process that occurs as women pursue authentic connection with others and experience growth, movement, change, and "healing in connection."

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