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# *The Impact of Family and Friends' Reactions on the Well-Being of Women With Abusive Partners*

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*This study examined the degree to which battered women talked with family and friends about abuse they were experiencing and how family and friends responded. Participants were 137 women who had recently experienced domestic violence and were exiting a shelter. Most women confided in family and friends about the abuse. Family and friends' reactions depended on contextual factors, including the woman's relationship with her assailant, number of separations, number of children, and whether family and friends were threatened. Family and friends' negative reactions and offers of tangible support were significantly related to women's well-being, although positive emotional support was not.*

**Keywords:** *battered women; domestic violence; help-seeking; social support*

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*Domestic violence is a pervasive problem in our society that adversely affects the physical and emotional well-being of millions of women annually (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Being physically and psychologically abused by an intimate partner or ex-partner has been found to be related to heightened levels of anxiety and depression as well as to an increase in physical health problems (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Sutherland,*

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Bybee, & Sullivan, 1998; Tollestrup et al., 1999). In the past two decades, researchers and practitioners have sought to identify those factors that may moderate these negative outcomes for battered women. One factor that has received increasing attention is social support.

Social support has been well documented as having beneficial effects on psychological well-being across a variety of populations (e.g., Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrimshaw, 1993; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). In general, people with family and friends who provide them with psychological and emotional resources are in better health than those with fewer supportive networks (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sarason et al., 1990). Researchers have typically found perceived support (support that an individual believes would be forthcoming if needed) to relate more strongly and consistently than enacted support (support that an individual has actually received) to individuals' overall quality of life (Kaniasty & Norris, 1992).

The role of social support has also been examined as it relates specifically to women with abusive partners. There is a great deal of support for the contention that battered women seek help from family and friends not only to emotionally cope with the abuse but also to actively protect themselves and their children (Bowker, 1984; Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001; Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Thompson et al., 2000). Women turn to their family and friends for advice, inspiration, and encouragement but also for tangible support (e.g., financial assistance, help with children, a place to stay). Mitchell and Hodson's (1983) study was the first to examine the connection between social support and abused women's psychological health. The authors found that having a larger number of supporters and more empathic friends and family was associated with greater psychological well-being (greater sense of mastery and higher self-esteem). Bowker (1984) and Donato and Bowker (1984) reported that the receipt of tangible support from family and friends was rated as being very important by women seeking to end their relationships with the men abusing them. More recently, Tan et al. (1995) and Thompson et al. (2000) reported that battered women's distress levels were significantly and negatively related to the levels of tangible and emotional support they received.

Evidence suggests, then, that social support networks can be helpful in reducing the negative impact of the violence battered women experience. Not all battered women, however, are surrounded by loving, supportive families who have the financial means to assist them. Some women are faced with family and friends who do not believe them, who blame them for the abuse, and/or who are too frightened themselves to intervene. Some women's social networks may have started out being supportive but may have become less so over time, if the women left but then returned to their abusers multiple times. Others might provide tangible help but in a blaming, emotionally unsupportive way, which may be more damaging than helpful to women's overall well-being.

Minimal research has investigated situational or contextual factors that might affect the type and extent of social support women receive from their family and friends. Although recent research has extensively documented that battered women engage in multiple active coping strategies and make logical decisions based on what they believe will be most effective and safe for themselves and their families (e.g., Fernandez-Esquer & McCloskey, 1999; Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998; Yoshihama, 2002), this expertise is still not recognized by many people or by society as a whole. Thus, it is important to understand how certain factors—such as the level of physical and psychological abuse a woman experiences, a woman's relationship with her assailant, the number of children she has, the number of separations from her assailant, and threats to her family and friends—affect family and friends' perceptions and responses. These variables potentially affect the ways in which family and friends might consciously or unconsciously respond differently to battered women, based on their assessments of women's "worthiness," their beliefs about what the "right" decision is for different women, and their appraisals of their own danger or risk.

For instance, factors that bind a woman to her assailant, such as being married to him and having minor children, may affect family and friends' responses because these relationships involve strong social norms. Because society sanctifies marriage, family and friends might believe that a woman has more responsibility to try to make her relationship "work" if she is married, and

therefore, they might be more likely to suggest that she seek therapy rather than involve the criminal or legal system. On the other hand, family and friends might legitimate the seriousness of violence more in a marital relationship and be more sympathetic, as opposed to not understanding why a woman did not just simply leave a nonlegally binding relationship. Women with minor children might also be perceived as more deserving or in need of help as the children may be viewed as innocent victims needing assistance (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Radford & Hester, 2001).

The number of separations women have had from their assailants is important because family and friends may not understand the complicated factors that make it difficult for women to leave or end abusive relationships or that often it is more dangerous for women to leave than to stay in an abusive relationship. Thus, family and friends might perceive women as ignoring their advice if the women continually return to an abusive relationship, which might make them less supportive. Battered women's advocates have long recognized that professionals and the majority of society have perceived a woman's decision to stay in or return to an abusive relationship to indicate that "she was unable to make decisions in her own interest" (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998, p. 14), rather than being aware that women make decisions based on whether they have the resources and social support necessary to leave an abusive relationship, the assailants' expected responses, and the fact that the assailants' behavior is not within their control unless society cooperates. However, given that women typically separate multiple times from their assailants (e.g., Okun, 1986, found that women left their assailants an average of five times before ending the relationship permanently, and Horton and Johnson, 1993, found that it took women who were leaving their assailants an average of 8 years to permanently end their relationships), it is important to investigate the impact of women's number of separations on the responses of their family and friends.

Recent research has documented the radiating effects of domestic violence, not only on the women experiencing the abuse but also on their family, friends, and other people in their lives (Riger, Raja, & Camacho, 2002). Because battered women's family members are sometimes threatened or harmed by women's

assailants, it is likely that these threats would affect family and friends' reactions and support. Fear for their own safety might make family and friends more reluctant to help battered women, but there is limited empirical evidence to support or refute this hypothesis.

In conclusion, to date, we know little about the types of reactions women face when they turn to family and friends for help with the abuse they are experiencing. We know even less about the role such reactions may play in affecting women's overall well-being. This study examined the degree to which battered women talked with family and friends about the abuse they were experiencing and the level of emotional and tangible support they received. It also explored those situational factors expected to affect family and friends' reactions, such as the number of times the woman had previously left her assailant, whether she was legally married to him, whether she had minor children to provide for, and whether the assailant was directly threatening the people to whom the woman turned. Finally, the study examined the impact of family and friends' various reactions on the women's well-being.

## METHOD

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In all, 137 women were recruited into this study after they exited a domestic violence shelter program located in a midsized Midwestern city.<sup>1</sup> Women were invited to participate regardless of their intention to return to or leave the person who had abused them. Of eligible women, 93% agreed to participate. Women were interviewed in their homes or at locations deemed by them to be safe and were paid \$10 for their participation.

The average age of the women was 29, with 81% of the sample younger than 35. Of the women, 90% had children. The majority (72%) were receiving government assistance, and 25% were employed at the time of the interview. Also, 47% of the women were African American, 39% were non-Hispanic White, 6% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian or Asian American. The remaining 6% were Native American, Arab American, or of mixed heritage.

Participants had spent an average of 20 days in the domestic violence shelter (ranging from 1 to 76 days).

## MEASURES

The interview contained both preexisting measures and measures created specifically for this study that assessed women's experiences of abuse, their relationship with their assailant, reactions from family and friends, and women's psychological well-being (quality of life and depression).

### Psychological Abuse Experienced

The 33-item Index of Psychological Abuse (Sullivan, Parisian, & Davidson, 1991) was used to measure the extent to which assailants used ridicule, harassment, criticism, and emotional withdrawal against the women (Cronbach's alpha = .97).

### Physical Abuse Experienced

A modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) was used to assess the violence women had experienced from their assailant in the previous 6 months. Women were asked how often (1 = *never* to 6 = *more than 4 times a week*) they had experienced various types of violence (e.g., choking and beating up). Following the rationale of Downs, Miller, and Panek (1993), responses were combined to create a frequency-severity scale of violence, with 0 indicating *no violence*, 1 indicating less severe abuse only (tore clothing, pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, and threw something at), 2 indicating lower frequency (once a month or less) severe abuse (kicked, hit with fist, hit or tried to hit with object, beat up, choked, tied up, raped, and threatened to use or used a knife or gun), and 3 indicating *high frequency of severe abuse*.

### Injuries Received

A 12-item scale was used to assess the types of injuries women suffered from their assailants (e.g., "soreness without bruises," "broken bones," or "internal injuries"). Women responded yes or no to each item (Cronbach's alpha = .71).

### Threats Received

One item asked women how often in the past 6 months their assailant had threatened them with any harm (1 = *never* to 6 = *more than 4 times a week*).

### Relationship With Assailant

Based on women's descriptions of their relationship with their assailant immediately prior to entering the shelter, the relationship was categorized as married (either living together or separated) or not married. This dichotomous categorization was used to examine whether women who were legally married might be treated differently by family and friends than women who were not in a legally binding relationship.

### Previous Separations From Assailant

Women were asked for the total number of times they had been separated from their assailant in the past.

### Reactions From Family and Friends

Ten questions were created for this study that asked about the responses women received when they tried to discuss the violence with their family and friends. Three items were combined to form an emotional support scale, with an alpha of .87 ("urged you to talk about how you felt," "acted like they cared about you," and "talked with you more often"). Four items were combined to form a negative reaction scale, with an alpha of .77 ("seemed uncomfortable talking about it," "became annoyed when you didn't accept their advice," "saw less of you," and "tried to change the subject"). Three items pertaining to specific advice or tangible support were analyzed individually ("urged you to call a lawyer or police," "urged you to see a counselor or therapist," and "offered you a place to stay"). For each question, women answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *quite a bit*).

### Depression

The Center for Epidemiological Studies—Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977) was used to assess women's depression. This was

a self-report checklist of psychological distress within the general population (Cronbach's alpha = .88). Women rated how often they had recently experienced each of 20 symptoms (0 = *rarely or never* to 3 = *most or all of the time*).

#### Quality of Life

An adapted version of Andrews and Withey's (1976) scale was used to measure women's subjective well-being or quality of life. Nine items assessed such things as the way they spent their spare time and how they felt about their level of responsibility. Women responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *terrible* to 7 = *extremely pleased*). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .88.

## RESULTS

The vast majority of the women (91%) reported having talked with family and/or friends about the violence they were experiencing. Almost three quarters of the women (72%) told at least one friend, and 70% told at least one relative. More than half (56%) sought help from both family and friends. Overall, women were more likely to receive emotional support than advice or tangible support when they talked to their family and friends about the abuse (emotional support  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ). Friends and relatives were about equally likely to offer women a place to stay ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), urge them to call the police or a lawyer ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), or urge them to see a counselor or therapist ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). Negative reactions from family and friends were the least common response received by women ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ).

#### CONTEXTUAL AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS RELATED TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS' REACTIONS

To examine whether the responses women received from family and friends when they discussed their abuse were related to certain situational and contextual factors, a series of correlations was examined (see Table 1). Interestingly, the frequency and severity of the physical abuse women experienced was not related to the reactions of their family and friends in any way. This may be because most women experienced high levels of physical abuse in

**TABLE 1**  
**Correlation Matrix of Family and Friends' Reactions, Abuse, and Contextual Factors**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Emotional support scale	—												
2. Negative reaction scale	-.49*	—											
3. Offer a place to stay	.37*	-.35*	—										
4. Urged to call lawyer or police	.25*	.04	.16	—									
5. Urged to see a counselor or therapist	.32*	-.03	.18*	.20*	—								
6. Physical abuse	.03	-.08	-.02	.16	.15	—							
7. Psychological abuse	.08	.14	-.04	.28*	.23*	.22*	—						
8. Injuries	-.05	.04	-.18*	.10	.10	.51*	.29*	—					
9. Threats to woman	.30*	-.03	.02	.23*	.17*	.27*	.47*	.29*	—				
10. Married to assailant	.27*	-.09	.05	-.09	.18*	-.20*	.11	-.15	.16	—			
11. Minor children living with woman	.05	-.22*	.05	.16	.03	.07	.01	-.19*	-.06	.08	—		
12. Previous separations	-.22*	.16	-.17	-.05	-.07	.03	.02	.04	-.01	-.11	-.04	—	
13. Threats to family or friends	.05	.19*	.04	.27*	.24*	.22*	.73*	.23*	.30*	.15	.04	-.03	—

\* $p < .05$ .

the 6 months prior to entering the shelter; so the variance on this variable was limited. The other results are discussed below, grouped according to the different reactions from family and friends.

#### **Factors Related to Emotional Support**

Three situational factors were related to the level of emotional support women received from their family and friends. Women received more emotional support from their family and friends if they were married to their assailants before entering the shelter ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ) and if they had experienced more threats from their assailants ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ). As hypothesized, the greater the number of separations women had from their assailants, the less emotional support they received from their family and friends ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ).

#### **Factors Related to Negative Reactions**

Women who had a greater number of minor children living with them received less negative reactions from their family and friends when they discussed the abuse ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ). Family and friends who were, themselves, being directly threatened by a woman's assailant responded more negatively to the woman about the abuse ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ).

#### **Factors Related to Being Offered a Place to Stay**

Only one situational or contextual factor was related to women being offered a place to stay: Women who experienced more injuries were less likely to be offered a place to stay ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ). This relationship remained significant after controlling for the level of physical and psychological abuse women experienced (partial  $r = -.19, p < .05$ ).

#### **Factors Related to Being Given Different Advice**

Women who experienced more psychological abuse were more likely to be urged by friends and family to call the police or a lawyer ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ). Interestingly, women who were married to their assailants were more likely to be urged to see a counselor or

therapist ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ). This relationship remained significant after controlling for the level of physical and psychological abuse women experienced. Women who experienced more psychological abuse were also more likely to be urged to see a counselor or therapist ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ). In addition, women were more likely to be urged to see a counselor or therapist the more threats the assailant had made either to the woman ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ) or to her family and friends ( $r = .24, p < .01$ ). Similarly, a woman was more likely to be urged to call the police or a lawyer the more threats the assailant had made to the woman ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ) or to her family and friends ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ).

Because some of the factors relating to reactions of friends and family were intercorrelated, multiple regression was used to sort out potentially redundant effects. Two multiple regressions were conducted to examine factors that might predict women receiving (a) emotional support and/or (b) negative reactions. Separate analyses for emotional support and negative reactions were conducted because these are empirically and conceptually distinct responses. Emotional support and negative reactions were not highly related to each other; they had approximately 25% shared variance ( $r = -.49, p < .05$ ). Thus, women who received high levels of emotional support from their friends and family did not necessarily experience fewer negative reactions.

For each regression, contextual and situational variables were entered as independent variables in a series of four blocks. The first block contained the four measures of abuse (physical abuse, psychological abuse, injuries, and threats) to control for the effects of different levels of assailant violence. The second block was composed of marital status and having minor children, as these variables could be construed as factors binding women to their assailants (or as being perceived by others to be such factors). The number of previous separations the woman had from her assailant was entered separately as the third block because it was expected that this might have an independent impact on family and friends' reactions to women if they perceived women as ignoring previous advice. Finally, assailants' threats against the women's friends and family were entered in the fourth block, because family and friends' sense of personal danger seemed likely to affect their support and willingness to help. The results of these regressions are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

**TABLE 2**  
**Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Support**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1 (β)</i>	<i>Model 2 (β)</i>	<i>Model 3 (β)</i>	<i>Model 4 (β)</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup> Change</i>
Block 1					
Physical abuse	-.01	.06	.05	.05	—
Psychological abuse	.01	-.06	-.04	-.03	—
Injuries	-.22*	-.16	-.15	-.15	—
Threats to woman	.28*	.24*	.25*	.25*	.10*
Block 2					
Marital status		.27*	.25*	.25*	—
Minor children		.05	.05	.05	.06*
Block 3					
Previous separations			-.09	-.09	.01
Block 4					
Threats to family or friends				-.01	.00

NOTE: Total  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(8, 97) = 2.48$ ,  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized. A dash indicates that the  $R^2$  change was not calculated because it was not meaningful.

\* $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Analysis Predicting Negative Reactions**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1 (β)</i>	<i>Model 2 (β)</i>	<i>Model 3 (β)</i>	<i>Model 4 (β)</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup> Change</i>
Block 1					
Physical abuse	-.18	-.19	-.19	-.21	—
Psychological abuse	.23*	.28*	.28*	.09	—
Injuries	.16	.08	.08	.09	—
Threats to woman	-.12	-.10	-.10	-.09	.07
Block 2					
Marital status		-.16	-.15	-.17	—
Minor children		-.20*	-.20*	-.21*	.06*
Block 3					
Previous separations			.01	.00	.00
Block 4					
Threats to family or friends				.26*	.03

NOTE: Total  $R^2 = .16$ ,  $F(8, 97) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized. A dash indicates that the  $R^2$  change was not calculated because it was not meaningful.

\* $p < .05$ .

### Predictors of Emotional Support

In total, level of abuse and contextual variables accounted for 17% of the variance of the positive emotional support women received from their family and friends. Women who experienced more threats from their assailant received more emotional support from family and friends ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ). After controlling for levels of abuse, women's relationship with their assailant before entering the shelter was also related to the emotional support they received, with women who were married to their assailant receiving more emotional support from their family and friends ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ). Interestingly, after controlling for the other variables, the number of separations women had from their assailants was not related to the emotional support they received from family and friends, although the unpartialled correlation was significantly negative.

### Predictors of Negative Reactions

The independent variables explained 16% of the variance of the negative reactions women received. After controlling for abuse, women who had a greater number of minor children living with them experienced less negative reactions from their family and friends when they discussed the abuse with them ( $\beta = -.21, p < .05$ ). As might be expected, women experienced more negative reactions from family and friends who were being directly threatened by the assailant ( $\beta = .26, p = .06$ ). The level of psychological abuse women experienced had a strong positive relationship with negative reactions that became nonsignificant once threats to family and friends was entered in the final block.

## IMPACT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS' REACTIONS ON WOMEN'S WELL-BEING

To examine the relationships between family and friends' reactions and women's well-being, two separate multiple regressions were conducted (one for each measure of women's well-being: quality of life and depression). It should be noted that quality of life and depression assess different aspects of women's well-being. Conceptually, quality of life refers to a general sense of contentment with one's experience of the world (Diener, Suh, Lucas,

**TABLE 4**  
**Correlation Matrix of Variables in Quality of Life and Depression Regressions**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Quality of life	—						
2. Depression	-.49*	—					
3. Physical abuse	.08	.05	—				
4. Psychological abuse	-.19*	.17*	.23*	—			
5. Emotional support	.14	-.07	.03	.08	—		
6. Offer of a place to stay	.23*	-.29*	-.02	-.04	.37*	—	
7. Negative reaction	-.29*	.24*	-.08	.14	-.49*	-.35*	—

\* $p < .05$ .

& Smith, 1999; Taylor & Bogden, 1990), whereas depression more specifically refers to an overall feeling of sadness and hopelessness. Although women's quality of life and depression were related in our study ( $r = -.49, p < .05$ ), their shared variance of less than 25% indicates that they are empirically distinct. For each of the regressions, the independent variables were entered in a series of four blocks. The first block contained physical abuse and psychological abuse because these variables would be expected to relate to women's well-being and thus needed to be controlled for in analyses of the other relationships. Positive emotional support was entered in Block 2 because it was the most common response provided to women and required less action than providing practical assistance. Offering a woman a place to stay (requiring actual action) was entered in Block 3. The negative reaction scale was entered in Block 4 to determine if it had any independent effect on well-being after controlling for positive emotional support and being offered a place to stay. A correlation matrix of the variables used in these regressions can be found in Table 4. The results of the regressions are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

#### Impact of Reactions on Women's Quality of Life

Together, emotional support, being offered a place to stay, negative reactions, and physical and psychological abuse accounted for 13% of the variance of women's quality of life. After controlling for physical and psychological abuse and positive support (both emotional and being offered a place to stay), negative reactions from family and friends were strongly related to lower quality of life for women ( $\beta = -.20, p = .05$ ). In the unpartialled

**TABLE 5**  
**Regression Analysis Predicting Quality of Life**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1 (β)</i>	<i>Model 2 (β)</i>	<i>Model 3 (β)</i>	<i>Model 4 (β)</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup> Change</i>	<i>Shared Effect</i>	<i>Unique Effect</i>
Block 1							
Physical abuse	.13	.13	.14	.11	—	.00	.01
Psychological abuse	-.22*	-.24*	-.22*	-.18*	.05*	.01	.03*
Block 2							
Emotional support		.16	.09	-.01	.02	.02	.00
Block 3							
Offer of a place to stay			.19*	.15	.03*	.03	.02
Block 4							
Negative reaction				-.20*	.03*	.06	.03*

NOTE: Total  $R^2 = .13$ ,  $F(5, 119) = 3.82$ ,  $p < .01$ . All coefficients are standardized. A dash indicates that the  $R^2$  change was not calculated because it was not meaningful.

\* $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 6**  
**Regression Analysis Predicting Depression**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1 (β)</i>	<i>Model 2 (β)</i>	<i>Model 3 (β)</i>	<i>Model 4 (β)</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup> Change</i>	<i>Shared Effect</i>	<i>Unique Effect</i>
Block 1							
Physical abuse	.01	.01	.00	.03	—	.00	.00
Psychological abuse	.17	.17	.16	.12	.03	.02	.01
Block 2							
Emotional support		-.08	.03	.11	.01	.00	.01
Block 3							
Offer of a place to stay			-.29*	-.26*	.07*	.03	.05*
Block 4							
Negative reaction				.19	.03	.03	.03

NOTE:  $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F(5, 119) = 3.67$ ,  $p < .01$ . All coefficients are standardized. A dash indicates that the  $R^2$  change was not calculated because it was not meaningful.

\* $p < .05$ .

correlations, being offered a place to stay also had a strong positive relationship with women's quality of life ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ), but this relationship became nonsignificant once negative reaction was added to the model, due to the negative correlation between these independent variables ( $r = -.35, p < .05$ ). Another way to understand these relationships is to examine the unique and shared effects that each of the predictors in the model had on quality of life. Unique effects are the amount of variance in the dependent variable (quality of life) that is uniquely accounted for by each predictor. Shared effects are the rest of the relationship between each predictor and quality of life that is also accounted for by one or more of the other predictors. In this model, negative reaction had the largest total effect on quality of life ( $R^2 = .09$ ), a substantial portion of which was shared with offer of a place to stay ( $R^2 = .06$ ) as well as a significant effect that was unique to negative reaction ( $R^2 = .03$ ). The next largest total effect was attributed to offer of a place to stay ( $R^2 = .05$ ), although only a nonsignificant portion was unique ( $R^2 = .02$ ), with the rest shared with negative reaction ( $R^2 = .03$ ). This suggests that it is the shared variance between negative reaction and offer of a place to stay that has the most impact on women's quality of life.

#### Impact of Reactions on Women's Depression

Fourteen percent of the variance of depression was accounted for by the reaction and abuse variables. Being offered a place to stay explained the majority of this effect (7%). After controlling for psychological and physical abuse and emotional support, being offered a place to stay was negatively related to women's depression ( $\beta = -.26, p < .01$ ). Emotional support was not related to women's depression ( $\beta = .11, ns$ ), which suggests that family and friends' actions and provision of tangible support may be more important than their words of support. The negative reactions of family and friends had a positive unpartialled correlation with women's depression ( $r = .24, p < .05$ ), but this effect did not remain significant in the regression after controlling for abuse and positive reactions from others ( $\beta = .19, ns$ ). As was the case with quality of life, this suggests that negative reactions and an offer of a place to stay share a certain amount of variance that affect women's depression.

By examining the unique and shared effects in the depression regression, it is evident that offering the woman a place to stay had the largest unique effect on women's depression ( $R^2 = .05, p < .05$ ) as well as the largest total effect ( $R^2 = .08$ ). Although negative reaction had a sizeable total effect ( $R^2 = .06$ ), the unique effect was nonsignificant. As with quality of life, women's depression is most strongly affected by the shared variance between negative reaction and an offer of a place to stay.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings revealed not only that the vast majority of women who are experiencing domestic violence seek help from their family and friends, but also that the reactions of family and friends affect women's well-being in important ways and depend on situational and contextual factors. Thus, this study supports prior research that has documented that most women do confide in their family and friends (Bowker, 1984; Krishnan et al., 2001; Tan et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 2000) yet goes further to extend our understanding of the different types of reactions that family and friends have, depending on women's particular circumstances, and the ways in which these responses affect women.

Of the contextual factors we examined, one interesting finding was that the greater number of separations women had from their assailants, the less likely they were to receive emotional support from family and friends. There are several possible explanations for this. One, family and friends may become frustrated and/or hurt by the woman returning to the abuser when they may have advised her to end the relationship. They may also feel hopeless and helpless if the woman goes back to the abusive relationship, as if their prior provisions of support were in vain. Family and friends may simply give up on the woman, believing that she will never end the relationship with the abuser and it is not worth the emotional investment to continue to provide support. This is particularly problematic because, as domestic violence research has consistently documented, leaving is often a lengthy process, with some women leaving multiple times before leaving permanently (Campbell, Miller, Cardwell, & Belknap, 1994; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Moss, Pitula, Halstead, & Campbell, 1997).

Unfortunately, many women may be receiving less emotional support at a critical time when they need it the most.

Another contextual factor related to emotional support was whether women were married to their assailants. Married women were more likely to receive emotional support from family and friends, suggesting that family and friends may legitimize the legally binding relationship more than other relationships and/or may view abuse within marriage as especially problematic. They may be assuming that a woman who is not legally married to her abuser would have an easier time leaving and in turn blame her more for the violence. Family and friends may also hold the belief of the sanctity of marriage and in turn better support a woman who is married because they believe that her relationship needs to stay together, feeling obligated to help her "save" her marriage.

Although not the most common response, some women did report receiving negative reactions from family and friends when they discussed the abuse they experienced. We did find, however, that women who had a greater number of minor children living with them were least likely to receive negative reactions. There are a number of plausible explanations for this. It may indicate that the abuse is viewed by family and friends as more problematic when children are involved. They may feel particularly badly for a woman who they believe is being abused in front of her children. They may feel bad for the children involved, who they believe may be witnessing the abuse, and thus out of sympathy respond better to their mother. Family and friends may also be less likely to blame a woman for remaining in the abusive relationship because they understand that it may be more difficult for her to leave a relationship when minor children are involved. It could also be that they believe the woman is putting up with the abuse for the sake of the children, to keep a roof over their heads, to keep food on the table, and to keep a father figure in their lives.

We also found that family and friends who were themselves being directly threatened by the assailant were more likely to respond negatively to women about the abuse. Recent research has documented that batterers sometimes threaten family members and destroy family property (Riger et al., 2002). Riger et al. (2002) found that extended family members are not only threatened with but also sometimes actually experience violence from the batterer, and they argued that these are possible reasons for

family members and friends distancing themselves from survivors. These findings potentially apply to our study as well. Family and friends may be least likely to show support to survivors when they fear for their own safety. As a result, they are more likely to respond negatively to women when they come to them for assistance. This is particularly problematic because it further compounds the isolation that women in abusive relationships experience.

It is important to examine the different contextual and situational factors that affect family and friends' reactions because these reactions affect women's well-being. In particular, our findings showed that family and friends' negative reactions held the most explanatory power when predicting women's quality of life. The finding that negative reactions were related to lower quality of life for women is an important one. That this relationship remained even after controlling for physical abuse, psychological abuse, and emotional support further highlights its significance. It suggests that over and above the abuse that women are experiencing at the hands of the abuser, family and friends' negative responses when women turn to them for help compound the harm by making women feel even worse about their situations and their lives overall. It may be that women feel betrayed by family and friends from whom they most need support in their time of need. It deserves mention here that in examining unpartialled correlations, being offered a place to stay was significantly positively correlated with women's quality of life; this relationship decreased after controlling for other variables. Thus, although practical support, such as offering women a place to stay, does seem to affect women's quality of life, its impact was not independent of the other types of responses we examined. These findings are consistent with other research in the field of violence against women, which has documented that unsupportive behavior of close family and friends negatively affects the well-being of rape survivors, while supportive behavior does not have a significant independent impact (Davis, Brickman, & Baker, 1991).

On the other hand, being offered a place to stay was the most significant (negative) predictor of women's depression. Being offered a place to stay was negatively correlated with women's depression even after controlling for physical abuse, psycho-

logical abuse, and emotional support. Emotional support, on the other hand, was not found to be significantly related to women's depression, suggesting that family and friends' offers of tangible support may be more important in improving women's well-being than emotional support alone. Although negative reactions of family and friends exhibited a significant positive correlation (unpartialled) with women's depression, the relationship was not significant after controlling for the other variables in the regression. Thus, in the case of women's depression, it is negative reactions that do not have an independent effect on this aspect of women's well-being. Taken together, these findings suggest that offering women a place to stay and refraining from negative reactions both have significant impacts on women's well-being. Given that positive emotional support was not significantly related to either measure of women's well-being, what seems most important are tangible forms of support and lack of judgment and criticism.

These findings suggest several policy and practice implications. First, many domestic violence shelter programs have policies that restrict women's interactions with and access to family and friends. Although validating that this is done in the interest of women's safety, it is also important to take into account the importance of the emotional and tangible support that women receive from their families and friends when developing these restrictions. Also, policies put into place to protect domestic violence survivors should also consider the safety of women's families and friends who may also have been threatened by assailants or otherwise be in danger when they offer support to the survivor.

Although this study offers some insights into the impact of family and friends' reactions on battered women, as with any research, this particular study has limitations that deserve mention. First, this research is cross-sectional and therefore cannot delineate causal relationships. Second, these analyses are based on women's self-report data only. It would be useful and interesting to document the perspectives of family and friends as well. Third, this study only included one measure of tangible support (offering a place to stay). Clearly, offering a survivor a place to stay is not the only form of tangible support that family and friends may offer or that women may need. Furthermore, some

women leaving abusive relationships are not in need of a place to stay, consequently making this an invalid measure of tangible support for them. However, it is likely that most women in this study did need a place to stay, given that they had all resided in a domestic violence shelter shortly before participating in the study. Thus, in this study, it was an appropriate indication of one form of tangible support. We must also note that our findings may have limited generalizability as our sample lacked socioeconomic variability due to all of the women in our study having low incomes. Another issue involves the low effect sizes obtained. Our regression analyses explained between 13% and 17% of the variance for each outcome. Future research to replicate these findings would thus be important, as well as exploration of other relevant predictors of family and friends' responses to women and of battered women's well-being. Finally, future studies should assess more contextual information regarding women's social support. A more in-depth assessment of what types of support women actually need, what types of support they actually receive, and what types of support they find helpful and unhelpful would be useful and necessary information.

Despite these limitations, this study begins to fill an important gap in our understanding of the role social support plays in battered women's lives. Clearly, family and friends' reactions are related in significant ways to women's well-being. We found that it is not just emotional support or offering women a place to stay that affects their depression and quality of life, but rather the combination of offering emotional and tangible support without judgment or other negative reactions that is important in promoting women's well-being. Furthermore, this study revealed that family and friends' reactions depended on situational and contextual factors, such as the legal status of women's relationships with their assailants and the number of children they had, rather than only on women's requests or need for support and assistance. Reactions were also influenced by whether family and friends were being directly threatened themselves by the assailants. Given the importance of family and friends in most women's lives, this research has implications for assessing women's ability to leave abusive partners when they choose to do so. Future research is needed that will more specifically examine the types of

support offered to battered women by family and friends as well as the impact of their reactions not only on women's overall well-being but also on their decisions to leave or remain with their abusive partners.

## NOTE

1. The participants in this study were the latter half of a larger sample of women who participated in the Community Advocacy Project (a longitudinal study of the impact of advocacy services on the well-being of women who experienced domestic violence) after more specific measures of social support were added to the interview protocol.

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