

Adjustment and Needs of African-American Women Who Utilized a Domestic Violence Shelter

Cris M. Sullivan
Maureen H. Rumptz
Michigan State University

To better understand what environmental and contextual factors influence resource acquisition and subsequent adjustment for African-American women who have been battered, this article explores the experiences of 60 women from the 6 months prior to entering a shelter through a 10-week postshelter advocacy program. Results indicate that African-American battered women who use domestic violence shelters face an array of obstacles: Most had been severely abused, were likely to be living below the poverty line, were unemployed, and were in need of numerous resources. However, in spite of numerous obstacles and continued violence, African-American women overall felt confident in themselves and satisfied with their lives 10 weeks after shelter. Results also indicate that short-term advocacy services were beneficial to African-American women exiting a domestic violence shelter. Implications of these findings as they relate to formal community response and further research are discussed.

Although literature on the battering of women has flourished over the last two decades, very little research has been conducted that examines how such violence relates to and affects African-American women specifically. Given that homicide at the hands of their intimate partners or ex-partners is the number one killer of African-American females between the ages of 15 and 34 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1985), the lack of attention paid to this grave social problem is notable.

A good deal of the research examining the effects of battering on women has focused on those who use domestic violence shelters. Although not all battered women turn to domestic violence shelters for assistance, a great many do. Over 2,000 domestic violence programs, primarily shelters, exist across the United States, and most are full at any given time. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the umbrella organization for these programs, estimates that for every woman who receives shelter, three are turned away for lack of space (Rita Smith, personal communication, 1993). For some women, a

domestic violence shelter is the only safe and accessible place to which to turn when escaping an abusive man.

Women who use domestic violence shelters have been found to need a variety of community resources. Batterers have successfully kept many women unemployed (Shepard & Pence, 1988), isolated from their family and friends (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983), and afraid for their lives and the lives of their children should they press charges (Browne, 1987). Although battering cuts across all socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and religious lines, women who utilize domestic violence shelters tend to be more economically impoverished than the general population. Women who have financial resources have more options when dealing with abusive men. They can afford private attorneys, more easily move their residence or stay in hotels, and have cars to leave the area, if necessary. For women who use shelters, however, limited resources often trap them with their assailants. Aguirre (1985) tested four antecedent variables and four covariates to determine what influences a woman's decision whether to return to an abuser. The only variable that affected this decision was the woman's economic dependence on her husband. Strube and Barbour (1983) reported similar findings. Women have reported needing numerous other community resources as well, including affordable housing, child care, and assistance from the police, the legal system, the health care system, and social service agencies (Dobash, Dobash, & Cavanagh, 1985; Gondolf, 1988; Sullivan, Basta, Tan, & Davidson, 1992).

Ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status place African-American women who use domestic violence shelters in triple jeopardy. The unemployment rate for blacks is more than double that for whites (Heckler, 1986), people from low-income homes are more likely to have dropped out of school (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988), and women of color fall at the bottom of the economic ladder, increasing their vulnerability to hazards and disease (Gordon-Bradshaw, 1988). Some African-American women are hesitant to call the police after having been battered, out of fear of the unjust treatment they believe their partners will receive from the predominantly "white" system (Garcia, 1985; White, 1985), or out of fear of being considered a "traitor" within the African-American community (Richie-Bush, 1983). Although no studies to date have specifically examined the issues relevant to African-American women who have used domestic violence shelters, one would expect that the barriers facing many women would be magnified. These barriers would include, but not be limited to, inadequate police response, lack of affordable housing, and lack of employment or education necessary to living independently.

The current article presents findings from a larger study designed to examine the process involved for women dealing with abusive partners and ex-partners. Through the use of an experimental, longitudinal design, we have been able to explore the interrelationships among experiences of violence, access to resources, and level of social support as they relate to women's psychological and physical well-being over time. This article deals specifically with the experiences of 60 African-American women beginning 6 months prior to entering the shelter through a 10-week postshelter advocacy program.

METHOD

Research Participants

Recruitment. All research participants were recruited from a domestic violence shelter located in a mid-sized, midwestern city whose population is 10% African-American women.

Every woman who stayed at the shelter at least one night and who planned on remaining in the area was told about the study by a research staff member. Potential participants were told that, should they agree to participate: they would be interviewed immediately upon shelter exit, 10 weeks thereafter (after intervention), and at 6 months after intervention; interviews would last approximately 1-2 hours and would be conducted in women's homes or in places convenient to them; they would be paid for their participation; and half the study participants would receive the free services of trained advocates for a period of 10 weeks, 4 to 6 hours per week. Advocates would be available to assist them in obtaining whatever community resources they needed, and would work with them in their own neighborhoods. It was explained that, due to limited project resources, the process of assigning advocates was random.

During the 13 months of recruitment for this study, only 7% of the eligible shelter residents declined to participate in the project. One hundred forty-six women completed initial interviews. In order to be considered a research participant, women had to be involved in the study for a minimum of 3 weeks. This time period was chosen in order to give women working with advocates adequate time to get acquainted and begin working. Of the 146 initial participants, 4 women ended their participation within the first 2 weeks, and 1 woman was murdered a week into the intervention. The final sample for the larger study consisted of 141 women. This article focuses exclusively on the adjustment and needs of the 60 African-American women from the original sample (43% of the total sample).

Demographics. Of the African-American women, ages ranged from 17 to 49, with a mean of 26.5 years ($SD = 6.20$). All but 10% had at least one child living with them. Eighty-seven percent were unemployed at the time they entered the shelter. Twenty-eight percent had completed high school or obtained a graduate equivalency degree (GED), and 30% had at least some college experience.

The mean length of shelter stay had been 19 days (range = 1-45, $SD = 11.7$). Before arriving at the shelter, 28% of the women had been married to and living with their assailants. An additional 45% had been living with their abusers but were not married to them. Nine percent were romantically involved with their assailants but had not been living together, and 18% had not been involved with the men at the time of the last assault (either separated, divorced, or no longer dating). Table 1 provides a breakdown of these demographic variables for project participants.

Seventy-seven percent of the sample reported at least 1 separation from their assailants prior to their arrival at the shelter, with one woman reporting as many as 216 prior separations. Fifteen percent of the women had left at least 10 times in the past (range = 0-216, median = 3, $SD = 27.8$). Violence against the women over the 6 months before entering the shelter had been quite severe, ranging from being pushed or shoved (95%) to being shot at or stabbed (13%). Injuries sustained during this time ranged from cuts and bruises (90%) to broken bones (25%) and knife or gunshot wounds (5%).

Seventy-eight percent of the sample had called the police at least once in the last 6 months, and 43% had sought medical attention. Fifty-five percent of the women believed they had needed medical attention in the last 6 months but had not sought it. Sixty-two percent of the women who had known their assailants at least 6 months reported that the violence within that time period had become more severe.

The Intervention

Advocates were female undergraduates enrolled for two consecutive terms in a community psychology course, through which they earned college credits. They were primarily juniors

TABLE 1. Demographic Information on African-American Participants

Variable	Percentages (<i>N</i> = 60)
Age, years (mean)	26.5
17-20	13
21-25	37
26-30	25
31-35	20
36-40	2
41-45	2
46-50	2
Percentage with dependent children	90
Under 5 years old	72
5 to 18 years old	73
Above 18 years old	3
Employed	13
Receiving governmental assistance	87
Living below the poverty line	73
Sole income provider	65
Relationship status preshelter	
Living together, unmarried	45
Married, living together	28
Married, separated	8
Divorced	2
Involved, not living together	7
Ex-girlfriend/boyfriend	8
Dating	2
Involved with assailant postshelter	28
Education level	
Less than high school	38
High-school grad/GED	28
Some college	27
College graduate	3
Trade school	3
Currently a student	12
Regular access to a car	20

Note. GED = general equivalency diploma.

and seniors enrolled at a midwestern university and were between the ages of 19 and 24, with a mode age of 20. Advocates received extensive training in empathy and active listening skills, facts surrounding battering, and strategies for generating and mobilizing community resources. It was emphasized repeatedly throughout training that interventions

were to focus on making the *community* more responsive to the needs of women with abusive partners. A training manual that explains training in more detail was developed for the course (Sullivan, 1989).

Forty-eight percent of the African-American women received the services of advocates. The majority of the advocates assigned to the African-American women were white (61%), followed by black (35%), and Asian American (4%).

Measures

Measures were chosen or constructed to examine the interrelationships among all variables present in the conceptual framework of this research. Specifically, instruments measured:

1. Those psychoemotional variables hypothesized by previous research to be affected by battering: depression, fear and anxiety, locus of control, emotional attachment to assailant, and self-efficacy;
2. Women's access to those resources that have been hypothesized to be instrumental in determining success in escaping abuse: housing, education, employment, finances, transportation, legal assistance, medical care, child care, issues regarding children, social support, and material goods;
3. Treatment effects of the intervention: specifically, the degree to which desired resources and social support were obtained;
4. Outcome variables: extent of psychological and physical violence in participants' lives over time; level of depression; fear and anxiety; locus of control; emotional attachment to assailant; self-efficacy; level of social support; and perceived overall psychological well-being.

In order to measure relationship with assailant, at each assessment period each participant was asked about the nature of her current relationship with the man who had battered her. *Emotional attachment* was measured by a 13-item, "true-false" scale developed for this study. Item-total correlations ranged from .35 to .65, with an alpha of .84.

Experience of *physical abuse* was measured by a modified version of Straus's (1979) Conflict Tactics Scale Violence subscale, found in this study to have an internal consistency of .90. Two items were dropped from this scale ("burned" and "drove recklessly so that you felt endangered") due to lack of variance. The *Index of Psychological Abuse* was specifically developed for this study, and is a 33-item measure of ridicule, harassment, and criticism experienced. Internal consistency of this scale was .97, with item-total correlations ranging from .51 to .90.

Depression was assessed by the CES-D (Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale) (Radloff, 1977), a self-report checklist of psychological distress within the general population (coefficient alpha = .88). *Long-term fear and anxiety* were measured by the first 40 items of the Kilpatrick's (1988) Rape Aftermath Symptom Test (RAST). This scale's internal consistency was .94, with item-total correlations ranging from .33 to .68.

Self-efficacy items were created specifically for this study. Three hypothetical situations were developed to examine what each woman would specifically do to obtain cheap furniture, a new job, and a new home. Women were asked to explain what exactly they would do (or instruct a friend to do) in these situations, how effective they thought these strategies would be in meeting their goals, and how confident they were in their abilities to engage in the mentioned behaviors. Internal consistency of this 6-item scale was .78, with item-total correlations ranging from .46 to .61. *Locus of control* was measured by Levenson's (1972) Internal-Powerful Others-Chance (IPC) scale, which has been used in prior

research with battered women. The Internal subscale of this scale was dropped from analyses due to low internal reliability. The Powerful Others subscale was combined with the Chance subscale (due to high intercorrelations) to create an External subscale, with $\alpha = .83$ and item-total correlations ranging from .24 to .56.

Effectiveness in obtaining resources was assessed, after intervention, in 11 areas: housing, material goods and resources, education, employment, health, child care, transportation, social support, legal assistance, finances, and issues regarding the children. Response categories were in the form of a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = very ineffective to 4 = very effective. The Effectiveness of Obtaining Resources (EOR) scale was then obtained for each woman by calculating the mean of her effectiveness scores across all areas in which she worked. Internal consistency of the EOR scale was .64.

Social support was assessed by a measure developed by Bogat, Chin, Sabbath, and Schwartz (1983), which has a coefficient alpha of .87. This instrument measured the perceived quantity and quality of women's overall social support, as well as specific domains of support: companionship, advice and information, practical assistance, and emotional support. *Overall psychological well-being* was measured by a modification of Andrews and Withey's (1976) Quality of Life measure. Twenty-five items that pertained to the experiences of battered women were selected to predict overall quality of life (coefficient alpha = .90, item-total correlations ranging from .30 to .65).

RESULTS

Resources Needed Across Time

During their first interview (upon shelter exit), women were asked what resources they thought they would be needing in the upcoming 10 weeks. They were asked if they thought they would be working on any of the following 11 areas: material goods (i.e., clothing, furniture), social support, education, health care, child care, other issues for their children, financial issues, employment, legal issues, transportation, and housing. Each area except housing was chosen by over half the sample.¹ The most often endorsed areas were material goods (95%), social support (80%), education (78%), and health care (77%).

During their second interviews, 10 weeks after exiting the shelter, women were asked whether they had actually worked on obtaining resources in each of the same 11 areas. All areas, including housing, had been worked on by at least half the sample. Education was the most endorsed area (77%), followed closely by material goods (73%), employment (71%), and health care (70%). Women who had worked with advocates were more likely to have worked on improving their educations (96% vs. 59%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 9.12; p < .01$) and on obtaining material goods (89% vs. 59%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 5.08, p < .05$). See Table 2 for a breakdown of the areas chosen by women at their first interviews, as well as what they actually worked on within the first 10 weeks after shelter, separated by experimental condition.

Involvement With Assailants and Experience of Abuse Over Time

When women left the shelter, 72% indicated the desire to terminate their relationships with their assailants. Ten weeks later, 71% were still not involved with the men who had abused them.

TABLE 2. Resources African-American Women Reported Needing Upon Shelter Exit and What They Worked on in the First 10 Weeks After Shelter

	Percentages					
	Expressed Need at Preinterview			Worked on Within First 10 Weeks		
	Experimental (<i>n</i> = 29)	Control (<i>n</i> = 31)	Total (<i>N</i> = 60)	Experimental (<i>n</i> = 27)	Control (<i>n</i> = 29)	Total (<i>N</i> = 56)
Material goods	100	90	95	89	59	73*
Social support	86	74	80	48	31	39
Education	83	74	78	96	59	77*
Health care	76	77	77	59	79	70
Child care**	74	70	72	57	41	48
Issues for children**	74	73	74	70	63	66
Financial issues	76	71	73	70	48	59
Employment	72	71	72	78	66	71
Legal issues	59	65	62	63	55	59
Transportation	66	55	60	59	41	50
Housing	55	35	45	70	52	61
Other	10	16	13	4	7	5

*Significant group differences at $p < .05$. **Refers to percentage of mothers in the sample.

Almost half of the sample continued to experience abuse in the first 10 weeks after shelter (46%). Women who were involved with their assailants were more likely to experience further violence (75%), but 35% of the women *no longer involved with their assailants* continued to be battered by them. There were no significant differences on this variable for whether women had or had not worked with advocates. Table 3 provides more extensive information about the extent and severity of violence experienced by women before and after shelter.

Intervention Effects

In order to examine whether working with an advocate would result in a woman being more effective in obtaining desired resources, a two-tailed *t* test was performed between the two conditions, with the EOR scale as the dependent variable. This test revealed that women who had worked with advocates reported being more effective in reaching their goals than women in the control condition ($t_{[52]} = 2.98$, $\omega^2 = .15$, $p < .01$). Means for the two groups were 2.87 for the control condition and 3.33 for the experimental group (4-point scale; 1 = very ineffective, 4 = very effective).

Program Intervention Effects. A repeated measures doubly multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, with two time periods (pre-post), one independent variable (experimental vs. control group), and nine outcome variables: physical abuse, psychological abuse, depression, fear and anxiety, locus of control, self-efficacy, emotional attachment to assailant, social support, and overall quality of life. A time \times intervention interaction was significant at the $p = .07$ level ($F_{[9,46]} = 1.93$); therefore, significant univariate tests within the MANOVA were examined.²

Univariate analyses suggested a monotonic interaction between the two conditions. At the postinterview, both groups reported significantly lower levels of physical abuse, psychological abuse, depression, fear and anxiety, and emotional attachment to their assailants. They also reported heightened feelings of personal control over their lives, social support, and overall quality of life. Although both groups improved significantly on eight

TABLE 3. Extent and Severity of Violence Experienced by African-American Participants

	Percentages	
	Six Months Preshelter (N = 60)	Ten Weeks Postshelter (N = 56)
Violence experienced		
Pushed or shoved	95	32
Grabbed	93	39
Choked	73	16
Slapped	70	18
Punched	63	14
Tried to hit with object	62	20
Had object thrown at her	52	16
Hit with (held) object	52	14
Tore clothing/broke glasses	50	14
Kicked	48	9
Sexually assaulted	48	9
Threatened with gun or knife	43	2
Physically restrained/tied up	42	14
Shot at or stabbed	13	0
Injuries sustained		
Cuts or bruises	90	14
Soreness without bruises	87	21
Strains or sprains	52	9
Broken bones	25	2
Internal injuries	13	5
Burns, including rug burns	15	4
Pregnancy complications, miscarriage	13	4
Dislocations	12	2
Broken or loose teeth	10	2
Knife or gunshot wound	5	0

of the nine outcome variables, women who had worked with advocates indicated even higher levels of social support ($F_{[1,54]} = 5.60, p < .05$), and were happier with their quality of life ($F_{[1,54]} = 4.38, p < .05$). Within the control group, women's feelings about their social support did not change (4.68 at "pre"; 4.70 at "post"), but the scores of the experimental group increased from 4.80 to 5.61 (7-point scale; 1 = terrible, 7 = extremely pleased). Similarly for quality of life, women's scores in the control group increased from 4.41 at "pre" to 4.54 at "post," whereas women in the experimental group reported an increase from 4.47 at "pre" to 4.92 at "post" (7-point scale; 1 = terrible, 7 = extremely pleased).

Ethnic Differences

The African-American and white research participants were compared on demographic variables, experiences of abuse over time, psychoemotional variables, and access to resources in order to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of battering on women's lives over time. African-American women had reported suffering significantly more severe abuse compared to the white women in the 6 months prior to entering the shelter ($t_{[121]} = 2.79, p <$

.01). They were also more likely to be living below the poverty level (73% vs. 45%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 8.92, p < .01$), to be the sole providers of their families (65% vs. 34%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 10.43, p < .001$), were less likely to have access to a car (20% vs. 44%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 6.94, p < .01$), and had more children living with them (mean = 2.1 vs. 1.4; $t_{[122]} = 3.06, p < .01$). African-American women had also resided at the shelter longer (mean = 19.3 vs. 14.5 days; $t_{[122]} = 2.17, p < .05$) than did the white women.

There were no significant differences for the percentage of women choosing to end their relationships immediately after shelter. Ten weeks later, however, African-American women were more likely *not* to be involved with their assailants (71% vs. 48%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 5.55, p < .05$).

When asked at the initial interview what they planned to work on over the first 10 weeks after shelter, African-American women were more likely to mention health issues (77% vs. 58%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 4.16, p < .05$), material goods and services (95% vs. 72%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 10.19, p < .001$), and financial issues (73% vs. 55%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 3.89, p < .05$). They were less likely to choose the "Other" category (13% vs. 36%; $\chi^2_{[1]} = 7.28, p < .01$). Under the "Other" category, most of the women mentioned wanting counseling. There were no significant ethnic differences for how many women actually worked in each of these areas over the first 10 weeks after shelter.

DISCUSSION

African-American women who use domestic violence shelters have been severely abused and are in need of numerous resources upon shelter exit. They are likely to be living below the poverty line, to be unemployed, and to be the sole providers of their families. However, in the face of all of this adversity, African-American women reported (10 weeks after shelter) a decrease in abuse, fear, anxiety, depression, and emotional attachment to their assailants, as well as an increase in social support, sense of personal control, and quality of life. In spite of numerous obstacles and continued violence, African-American women overall felt confident in themselves and satisfied with their lives. These findings suggest that African-American women who use domestic violence shelters are able to maintain positive self-concepts despite the forces of racism, sexism, and classism all acting to perpetuate an environment of relatively impoverished economic resources, continued abuse, and inadequate formal community response. Future research would benefit by examining women's resiliency and developing interventions that build on their many strengths.

This study also suggests that advocacy interventions with African-American battered women can systematically affect resource acquisition. Women who worked with advocates reported being even more pleased with their level of social support than women who did not, and also reported having an overall higher quality of life. In addition, they reported being more effective in obtaining desired community resources. Future research needs to build on this advocacy model, examining and influencing the many systems that contribute to a woman's ability or inability to successfully escape an abusive partner. Given that the women who worked with advocates reported being more effective in obtaining resources, the advocacy approach with battered women deserves further study.

However, providing advocacy services, although helpful, is not enough. Racism places African-American women who have been battered at an even greater disadvantage than white women in obtaining the resources necessary to remain free of abuse. Therefore, we must work to change the current institutional response to African-American women who have been battered.

Shelters for battered women are one place to begin to improve community response to African-American women. The findings of this study support Coley and Beckett's (1988) assertion that African-American women are not as likely as white women to turn to shelters unless the violence against them becomes quite severe. African-American women in our study had suffered more severe violence before entering a shelter compared to the white women. If, as Coley and Beckett (1988) suggest, this is due, at least in part, to African-American women's belief that shelters are for white women only, more shelter outreach is necessary to African-American women. Information should be disseminated through churches, community centers, and housing projects that predominantly serve African Americans. Internal changes must also continue within many shelters to make them more welcoming to African-American women. Staff should be ethnically diverse, and shelter policies should be created within the context of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Our study also suggests that once African-American women arrived at the domestic violence shelter, they needed to remain there for a significantly longer period of time than white women before they acquired the resources necessary to leave. The reasons for this merit further study; however, our experiences in working with African-American battered women lead us to conclude that institutionalized racism seriously limits African-American women's access to resources. For example, on numerous occasions African-American women would be quoted one apartment rental price over the telephone, only to have the price raised when the white landlords met them in person. White advocates also noted the frequency with which white service providers directed all comments to them, as opposed to their black clients.

Other community service providers who need to improve their response to African-American battered women include the police, the clergy, and social services. Black women should not be faced with the choice between their own physical safety and protecting their assailants from a racist criminal justice system. The black church, often a stronghold of the African-American community, should not be a place that perpetuates male domination and female subordination if it is to be a safe haven for abused women. Social service agencies should not be staffed by white personnel who will patronize, ignore, or be hostile toward African-American clients. All of these forces, separately and together, serve to trap African-American women with abusive partners.

Focusing on the specific experiences of African-American women who have been battered is important to better understand how our communities, and society as a whole, can most effectively respond to end the violence against them. Although a fist in the face will hurt all women equally, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or social class, the events that occur *after* the violence will differ depending on these, as well as numerous other, variables. Women are a heterogeneous group of people, and as such have different experiences and needs. To date, however, African-American women's experiences have been largely ignored or minimized by the majority culture. This article provides a modicum of information regarding the experiences of African-American women who utilize domestic violence shelters. It cannot be expected, however, that women who use shelters share the same experiences and needs as women who do not. Age, physical handicap, geographic region, and socioeconomic factors are but a few other variables that might also influence the adjustment of black battered women over time. Additional research is needed to answer these questions and to more adequately understand and respond to the adjustment and long-term needs of African-American battered women.

NOTES

¹Interviews were conducted after women had left the shelter and already obtained housing. Had the interviews been conducted while women were still at the shelter, the percentage of women needing to work on housing would have been much higher.

²The MANOVA for the entire sample of women ($N = 139$) was significant at $p < .05$.

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