This article critically examines four theoretical approaches identified by Strube (1988) as relevant to abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes. It is argued that these four approaches have overlapping components that may be combined into a single framework for understanding abused women’s stay/leave decisions. The essential aspects of abused women’s stay/leave decisions appear to revolve around two central questions: “Will I be better off?” and “Can I do it?” This model proposes that abused women’s stay/leave decisions occur in a stepwise fashion. A woman may wish to leave her relationship but be inhibited from doing so because she does not feel she has control over her circumstances. Conversely, a woman may have the necessary resources for leaving but may wish to remain in the relationship. Empirical work in the fields of marital and dating violence is reviewed and provides preliminary support for the components of this two-step model of abused women’s stay/leave decisions.

A Conceptual Approach to Understanding Abused Women’s Stay/Leave Decisions

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Women who find themselves in an abusive relationship must ask themselves difficult questions. They must decide, perhaps on a daily basis, whether they should remain in their relationship or leave. Strube (1988) asserts that whatever form these questions take, the basic underlying assumption concerning the decision to stay in or leave an abusive relationship is that the decision

is a “rational” decision from the perspective of the decision maker. The decision is based on an analysis of available “data” and follows predictable “decision rules.” The outcome may be considered abnormal by normative standards (i.e., Who in their right mind would choose to remain in an abusive relationship?), but the process is not pathological (p. 240).

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Thus based on this premise all women can choose to stay in or leave their relationships, but not all women perceive that they have this choice, nor are they in equal positions to act on it.

So, why does she stay? The question is familiar, yet little empirical research has assessed abused women’s stay/leave decisions directly. Even less attention has been directed toward theory development. In an initial attempt to summarize the available empirical and theoretical literature on abused women’s stay/leave decisions, Strube (1988) has identified four theoretical approaches as potentially useful for guiding future research. The first of these theories is the theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) that has been used by Walker (1978, 1983) to explain why some women remain in abusive relationships. The three other approaches are (a) psychological entrapment (Brockner & Rubin, 1985); (b) the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983, 1991; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993); and (c) reasoned action and/or planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In contrast to the theory of learned helplessness, these approaches are borrowed from domains that traditionally have not been used in research on battered women.

The purpose of this article is to continue to focus attention on these four theoretical approaches to facilitate greater conceptual understanding of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes. Specifically, the theories identified by Strube are examined in terms of their overlapping and unique components to uncover the most essential elements of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes. Based on this critical review, a conceptual model of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes is developed. Related empirical work conducted on wife abuse and dating violence is reviewed and implications for future research based on this model are presented.

THEORY REVIEW

The theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) was first applied to the wife-abuse domain by Walker (1978, 1983), who conducted more than 100 interviews with battered women from her clinical practice in psychology. The theory is conceptualized as cyclical, involving three types of deficits: motivational, cognitive, and affective. According to Walker (1978, 1983), an abused woman experiences a motivational deficit when she believes her responses do not affect her outcomes, and she has no incentive to emit new responses. In effect, she comes to believe there
is nothing she can do to change her situation so she stops trying. This motivational deficit leads to a cognitive deficit consisting of the inability to learn that outcomes can be contingent on responses in a new situation. For example, if a woman’s situation were to change, or she were to be offered a new strategy to improve, or get out of, her relationship, she would be unwilling to try it, again believing that nothing within her control can help her. This cognitive deficit leads to an affective deficit or depressive state that further feeds into the woman’s motivational deficit, and so on. As a result, the woman becomes unable to escape the violence against her (Walker, 1978).

The theory of psychological entrapment similarly conceptualizes an abused woman as somehow stuck in her relationship. Psychological entrapment is defined as “a decision process whereby individuals escalate their commitment to a previously chosen, though failing, course of action in order to justify or ‘make good’ on prior investments” (Brockner & Rubin, 1985, p. 5). The theory was originally developed to explain everyday annoyances such as why a person would continue to wait for a bus to ride a distance that could have been walked in a shorter amount of time. The theory has been applied most often to research in the field of organizational behavior. The experience of psychological entrapment rests on several component steps that occur in sequence. To become entrapped, a woman must first demonstrate investment toward a goal. For example, an abused woman typically invests time, energy, and emotional involvement to attain the goal of a congenial and nonviolent relationship. Next, the woman receives negative feedback about attaining her goal (i.e., continued abuse). When this feedback occurs, she feels uncertainty about whether she can reach her goal. She may wonder whether her relationship could get better “if only I tried harder.” If she decides that the goal is attainable, she must ask herself whether it is still worth continued investments. This self-questioning produces conflict. To the extent that she remains committed to the relationship (further invests in it) on the basis of justifying prior investments (“too much invested to quit,” Teger, 1980), she is considered to be entrapped.

The other two theories identified by Strube (1988) are similar to the theory of psychological entrapment in that they are best understood as explaining one’s commitment to a previously chosen course of action. When applied to the wife-abuse domain, both the investment model and the reasoned action/planned behavior approach assume that a woman will (a) subjectively evaluate how satisfied she is with her current relationship, (b) determine her attitude toward further maintaining this relationship, and
(c) decide whether she thinks she would be better off if she were to leave the relationship. The investment model is based on relative costs and benefits and takes its roots from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The concepts of satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and irretrievable investments are central to the investment model. Satisfaction is defined as all the good things that draw one to a relationship and how positively someone feels about his or her partner and relationship, whereas quality of alternatives is viewed as all the forces that serve to pull someone away from his or her current relationship (Rusbult, 1991). Investments refer to the variety of ways in which individuals become bound to their partners and relationships. They may be direct, such as time spent in the relationship or self-disclosure, or they may be indirect, such as outside friendships that were not originally part of the relationship but that become inextricably connected to the relationship (Rusbult, 1991). The investment model is unique in that it distinguishes satisfaction from commitment—a person’s tendency to maintain and feel attached to his or her relationship (Rusbult, 1991).

The reasoned action/planned behavior approach (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is based on the assumption that human beings are usually quite rational and make systematic use of information available to them. The theory of reasoned action has received considerable attention in the social psychological literature with regard to a broad array of decision-making behaviors that were fully under the decision-maker’s control, such as how to vote in an election or whether to exercise or watch a videotape. The theory of planned behavior represents an extension of the theory of reasoned action and accounts for the independent influences of one’s perceived behavioral control on one’s behavioral intention. As noted by Strube (1988), the theory of planned behavior reduces to the theory of reasoned action when the target behavior is fully under an individual’s control. Empirical evidence has yet to demonstrate whether abused women perceive the decision to stay in or leave their relationships as fully under their control.

According to the reasoned action/planned behavior approach, people consider the implications of their actions before they decide whether to engage in a given behavior. The theory predicts that one’s intention to perform a behavior is the immediate antecedent of the performance of that behavior. A person’s behavioral intention is a function of his or her information and beliefs about the likelihood of the performance of a particular behavior leading to a desired outcome. The information and beliefs about the behavior and its outcome are divided into two sets
wherein all determinants of behavior are conceptualized as acting through one's attitude toward the behavior, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm. Subjective norm refers to what an individual's significant others (i.e., friends, family members) think the individual should do with regard to performing a behavior multiplied by the individual's motivation to comply with the wishes of his or her significant others.

In the context of an abused woman's stay/leave decision-making process, the reasoned action/planned behavior approach would predict that a woman would be more likely to leave her relationship if (a) she views leaving as having a positive outcome, (b) she perceives leaving is within her control, and (c) her significant others want her to leave and she is motivated to comply with their wishes. The theory implies that an abused woman will be more likely to leave her relationship to the extent that all of these criteria are met. An abused woman's likelihood of leaving thus decreases proportionally with each condition left unsatisfied.

THEORY INTEGRATION

A critical examination of these four approaches suggests that for women in abusive relationships, stay/leave decisions revolve around two central questions that are influenced by several factors (see Figure 1). Abused women must ask themselves "Will I be better off (outside of this relationship)?" and "Can I do it (exit successfully)?" These two questions allow the major concepts and propositions from the four approaches to be organized into a single framework for understanding stay/leave decision-making processes among abused women. In addition, the nature of these questions suggests a logical temporal ordering such that the answer to the first question would seem to determine the relevance of the second question. The response of the second question may in turn influence the decision outcome of the first question, thereby revealing the likely reciprocal nature of this process.

WILL I BE BETTER OFF?

The model suggests that an abused woman will first decide whether she thinks her overall quality of life will be more favorable with or without her current relationship (i.e., "Will I be better off?"). This step of the decision-making process is influenced by her feelings of relationship satisfaction, her perception of irretrievable investments, her quality of alternatives, and her subjective norm. The theories of reasoned
Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Abused Women’s Stay/Leave Decision-Making Processes.
action/planned behavior, investment, and psychological entrapment directly address this step of the model. The concepts of satisfaction and quality of alternatives are most fully illustrated by the investment model. The investment model predicts that a woman will be satisfied with her relationship to the extent that she feels her rewards are greater than her costs, and if she has a low comparison level, or internal standard, for evaluating relationships.

According to both the investment model and the theory of psychological entrapment, an individual’s perception of irretrievable investments is an important factor in stay/leave decision making. To the extent that a woman is dissatisfied with her relationship, yet remains committed due to high investments and a lack of alternatives, she is considered to be trapped (or entrapped; Rusbult, 1991).

The theories of reasoned action/planned behavior also contribute to the question “Will I be better off?” through their conceptualization of subjective norm. The concept of subjective norm reflects the effect of other’s perceptions of the relationship. An abused woman’s significant others may influence her subjective evaluation of her relationship based on their perceptions of her partner and the quality of her relationship. They may encourage her to maintain her abusive relationship if they believe (a) she has the “perfect” husband, (b) their close relationships are similar to hers, or (c) that she could not “do better.” The concept of subjective norm suggests that an abused woman who is dissatisfied with her relationship might nevertheless choose to stay in it to comply with the wishes and expectations of her significant others.

**CAN I DO IT?**

If a woman decides that her quality of life will be better outside of her relationship, she will proceed to the second step of the model that involves asking herself “Can I do it?” According to the theories of reasoned action/planned behavior, psychological entrapment, and learned helplessness, this question is influenced by resources and barriers, both of which may be personal and/or structural in nature. Examples of personal resources and barriers that are relevant to an abused woman’s stay/leave decision-making process are the related concepts of self-efficacy and feelings of control. Based on the reasoned action/planned behavior approach, a person would have a strong sense of perceived control with respect to a particular behavior to the extent that he or she possesses the requisite resources and opportunities for performing that behavior.
The concept of perceived control also appears to be a key component of the theory of psychological entrapment. According to this theory, an abused woman desiring a harmonious relationship perceives uncertainty as to whether her relationship will ever become nonviolent. She must choose between staying in the relationship, which entails further investing in it, or leaving. The theory implies that she cannot experience conflict over what to do if she perceives she has no control over her circumstances. Alternately, if leaving the relationship is her goal, she may experience a similar entrapping experience while trying to leave. For example, she may put forth serious investments such as the effort required to get a job or find an apartment, only to experience setbacks such as not being able to find affordable child care. These setbacks may lead her to question whether she still thinks she can leave the relationship and whether leaving is worth further efforts.

The theory of learned helplessness also contributes to our understanding of personal and structural resources and barriers relevant to an abused woman’s stay/leave decision-making process. According to this theory, a woman who has suffered the deficits associated with learned helplessness may lack the motivation to act on her own behalf to improve her situation. She may believe her actions do not determine her outcomes and give up trying to improve or exit her relationship because she no longer believes she has control over her circumstances. This lack of perceived control, or self-efficacy, serves as a personal barrier that inhibits her from leaving, even if she wishes to do so. Conversely, a high level of self-efficacy can serve as a valuable personal resource that may motivate a woman to use effective problem-solving strategies and persevere in her wish for a better life, even in the face of setbacks.

With regard to structural resources and barriers, the theory of planned behavior suggests that individuals who possess the required opportunities for behavioral performance are more likely to perceive control over a given behavior and are in turn more likely to perform the behavior. For an abused woman who holds the goal of leaving her relationship, structural resources for leaving may take the form of money, education, employment, and the availability of a domestic violence shelter or friends to stay with. Ineffective assistance from social service agencies, the legal bond of marriage, and having nowhere to live may serve as structural barriers that abused women perceive as limiting their control over leaving their relationships, thus increasing their difficulty for doing so.

Thus personal and structural resources and barriers together contribute to an abused woman’s evaluation of whether she believes she can leave.
her relationship successfully. A woman who has a variety of personal and structural resources at her disposal will feel more in control of her circumstances and more efficacious toward leaving than a woman who is faced with a multitude of personal and structural barriers.

THE MODEL VIS-A-VIS EACH THEORY

When the model is viewed as a whole, the unique and overlapping contributions of each of the theories can be seen. The theories of reasoned action/planned behavior, psychological entrapment, and the investment model contribute to the question “Will I be better off?” The theories of reasoned action/planned behavior, psychological entrapment, and learned helplessness contribute to the question “Can I do it?” The resulting two-step model is holistic in that it provides a fuller description of an abused woman’s stay/leave decision-making process than any of the theories considered separately.

Investment Model

The investment model predicts that the components of relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and irretrievable investments are related to the question “Will I be better off?” in that these three components lead to an individual’s decision to either maintain or dissolve her relationship. An implication of the investment model is that if a woman decides to leave her relationship, she will do so. Consideration is not given, however, to the individual’s ability (or perceived ability) to actually leave. The model proposed herein goes beyond the investment model by including this important second step as it relates to abused women’s decision-making processes.

The proposed model adds also to the investment model by including the concept of subjective norm. Research on social networks indicates that actions, and perceived reactions, from significant others can affect whether relationships thrive (see Surra, 1990). The inclusion of subjective norm as a component of the model highlights the role that social networks play in the maintenance and dissolution of relationships.

Learned Helplessness

In contrast to the investment model’s contribution to the first question, the theory of learned helplessness only addresses the second step of the
model. The theory of learned helplessness focuses on an abused woman's feelings of perceived personal control (or lack thereof) with regard to leaving her relationship. The theory makes an a priori assumption that she already has decided to leave. This assumption may not represent the full scope of her decision-making process. Leaving the relationship may not accurately represent her desires, intentions, or what best suits her needs at a given point in time. The proposed model draws attention to the possibility that she may not want to leave.

**Psychological Entrapment**

The theory of psychological entrapment contributes to both steps of the model, yet it is not fully inclusive of all the components of an abused woman's decision-making process. The theory primarily focuses on an individual's perception of irretrievable investments as related to the question "Will I be better off?" Attention is given also to one's perception of personal control as related to the question "Can I do it?" The theory of psychological entrapment, however, provides an incomplete understanding of abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes by failing to incorporate relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and subjective norm as related to the question "Will I be better off?" Furthermore, although the theory accounts for the influences of perceived personal control, no consideration is given to what factors affect an individual's perceptions of control. The proposed model addresses this deficit by including the constructs of personal and structural resources and barriers as influencing an abused woman's perceptions of whether she can leave her relationship successfully.

**Reasoned Action/Planned Behavior**

The major contribution of the reasoned action/planned behavior approach to the model is the identification of resources and barriers as components of the construct of perceived control, or the question "Can I do it?" This approach adds also the component of subjective norm to the model as well as addresses the concept of relationship satisfaction and the question "Will I be better off?" The approach does not, however, include the concepts of quality of alternatives or irretrievable investments that are necessary for a more complete understanding of the first question in the model. Although the reasoned action/planned behavior approach provides a full picture of the second question in the model, and addresses compo-
ments of the first question, this approach does not conceptualize the two questions as stepwise. The proposed model reorganizes the concepts offered by this approach to more fully describe abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes.

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

For more than two decades, researchers have been investigating factors associated with wife battering and dating violence. Efforts have focused primarily on describing the characteristics of abusers and victims, and on determining the prevalence, consequences, and correlates of relationship violence (for reviews see Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Less attention has been directed toward identifying specific factors associated with a woman’s decision to stay in or leave an abusive relationship. The research that has been conducted is largely exploratory and atheoretical in nature. Nevertheless, these studies provide preliminary evidence in support of the proposed model. The existing research is organized below on the basis of its relevance to the various components of the two-step stay/leave decision-making model.

WILL I BE BETTER OFF?

Recent research draws attention to the centrality of the latent construct “Will I be better off?” in abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes. Rosen and Stith (1995) qualitatively studied how 11 women “disentangled” themselves from their abusive dating relationships. The women said that the processes involved in leaving their relationships included seeds of doubt, turning points, reappraisals, objective reflections, last-straw events, and paradigmatic shifts. The study’s strength was its ability to link cognitive and behavioral processes associated with leaving an abusive dating relationship with interpersonal and critical life events described by the women in their retrospective accounts. The paradigmatic shift—which is similar to the phenomenology of answering the question “Will I be better off?”—was interpreted as having a powerful effect on the women’s decisions to leave their relationships.

Satisfaction

Exchange theorists have carefully considered the meaning of satisfaction within interpersonal relationships (for a summary, see Sabatelli &
Shehan, 1993). They note the importance of considering experiences and expectations in addition to the rewards obtained and costs incurred in relationships to fully understand the concept of relationship satisfaction. That is, relationship outcomes (rewards minus costs) and relationship satisfaction are not considered equivalent conceptually. Bearing in mind this distinction, studies of rewards and costs associated with involvement in an abusive relationship serve as the closest proxy for satisfaction within this literature. These studies are the main source of empirical support for this aspect of the model.

Research historically has focused on the costs related to how and why women stay in abusive relationships. Only recently has attention been directed toward identifying rewards that are associated with relationships that are simultaneously abusive. Herbert, Silver, and Ellard (1991), for example, focused specifically on assessing the effect of positive aspects of abusive relationships (mutual trust, love, respect, satisfaction with sex, sharing of household chores, and moments of great happiness) on women's stay/leave decisions. Results indicated that women still involved with their abusive partner perceived more positive aspects of the relationship than did those who were no longer involved. Additional exploratory analyses concerning levels of positive relationship attributes suggested that women who would leave their relationship if they had the resources to do so were more similar to women who had left their relationships than to women who would not leave their relationships even if they had the resources. These findings highlight the important role rewards play in the stay/leave decision-making processes of women in abusive relationships.

Strube and Barbour (1983, 1984) have conducted studies on abused women's perceptions of relationship rewards and costs by examining their feelings of psychological commitment and economic dependence on their partners. They measured both of these variables objectively as well as subjectively. Additional categories of relationship maintenance also were assessed. Upon admission to a battered women's shelter, they had a counselor ask subjects why they had remained with their abuser thus far. Self-reported responses included economic and noneconomic dependence, love, abuser promised he would change, stayed for the sake of the children, fear, nowhere else to go, and other miscellaneous reasons. However, only love, economic hardship, and initially believing the abuser would change predicted subsequent stay/leave decisions. Thus the authors concluded that a woman initially may feel satisfied and remain committed to her relationship for reasons that have little or no bearing on whether she later stays or leaves.
Strube and Barbour (1983, 1984) interpret abused women’s claims that they still love their partners as a form of personal attachment to the relationship. They note Straus’s (1980) work that points out that being a wife and mother are important roles for a woman and society places the burden of family harmony on her: A failed marriage is her fault. During unstructured interviews, Gelles (1976) learned that many women are reluctant to call the police, go to a social service agency, or file for divorce because these actions would “rupture the carefully nurtured myth of their fine family life” (p. 666). It follows that some women may be willing to tolerate abuse to “save” the relationship. Women who believe their partner will change may “try to make it work one more time” (Strube & Barbour, 1983). According to this analysis, being a member of a relationship, especially a relationship that appears trouble-free to outsiders, may be rewarding to an abused woman and may translate into feelings of satisfaction with the relationship. Likewise, it can be inferred that women who reported having stayed in their relationship for the sake of the children believed that staying would in some way benefit their children and family life. This reason for staying is qualitatively different from staying because of the difficulty of supporting children on one’s own.

A dangerous form of relationship reward or “need fulfillment” has been found among young women who have left violent dating relationships. Based on retrospective interviews with these women and grounded theory, Rosen (1996) identified romantic fusion as a maintenance factor in abusive relationships. Romantic fusion describes a type of relationship that is all-consuming. The women reported that all their needs, including needs for personal safety, were subsumed by the relationship. They felt fused to their partner, as if their separateness had disappeared (Rosen, 1996). This feeling was further strengthened by a form of traumatic bonding in which the women felt tied to their partner as a result of having survived abusive incidents together. These women were committed to the relationship because the relationship was necessary to their sense of self.

Evidence suggests that some women may remain in an abusive relationship for a while but eventually will leave when the costs of staying become too severe. According to Rounsaville (1978), women who left abusive relationships were more likely than those who stayed to have experienced severe abuse, to fear being killed, and to have partners who also abused their children. The endangerment of children has been cited as a reason for leaving in other studies as well (Hilton, 1992; Pfouts, 1978; Snyder & Fruchtman, 1981). The discovery of child abuse or a particularly severe and/or frightening episode of violence may constitute a last-straw event or turning point that serves as the impetus for a woman to decide
she can no longer remain in the abusive relationship and that she would be better off without it (Rosen & Stith, 1995). For example, Pfouts (1978) found that the timing of a woman's exit from her relationship depended on her satisfaction with it (as defined by rewards minus costs). When the costs of the abusive relationship exceeded the rewards, a woman was more likely to exit her relationship early and quickly. When a woman was satisfied with her relationship, she was more likely to invest many years in “saving” the relationship, only to leave reluctantly after finally believing that the abuse was too high a cost for herself and her children to endure. A recent study by Lloyd (1990) provides further support for this type of analysis. Lloyd documented couples who were maritally violent yet evaluated their relationships as personally satisfying, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). It seems plausible that nondistressed-violent couples may represent an early stage of relationship development wherein the violence has not yet affected satisfaction (Lloyd, 1990).

**Irretrievable Investments**

With regard to irretrievable investments, several studies within the marital and dating violence literature have found that abused women with relatively longer-term relationships are more likely to stay with their abuser, or return to him following a shelter stay, than those with shorter-term relationships (Lo & Sporakowski, 1989; Snyder & Scheer, 1981; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). When a woman has invested heavily in her relationship, she may feel stuck (trapped) in it, especially if she lacks desirable alternatives. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) call this situation nonvoluntary dependence. Rusbult and Buunk (1993) call it nonvoluntary commitment and view it as synonymous with entrapment.

**Quality of Alternatives**

Research indicates that abused women are more likely to stay in their relationships when their alternatives to their relationships are poor. For example, Strube and Barbour (1983, 1984) found that abused women initially stayed in their relationships because they perceived they had nowhere else to go. Similarly, in a post hoc subjective classification of 35 cases of wife abuse, Pfouts (1978) determined that, among the abused women who left their relationships, 80% of them did so when the rewards of alternate relationships exceeded the costs of alternate relationships.
The influence of alternatives on stay/leave decisions also has been demonstrated in the dating violence literature. Research conducted with high school and college students (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, Christopher, 1983) revealed that individuals who stayed in violent dating relationships perceived few dating alternatives. Limited alternatives to the violent relationship were interpreted as a possible cause for remaining in the relationship.

Summary

Taken together, this research indicates that satisfaction, irretrievable investments, and quality of alternatives are critical factors contributing to an abused woman’s evaluation of whether she believes she will be better off with or without her relationship. A woman’s evaluation of her satisfaction with the relationship may include obvious rewards such as economic support, but also may include more subtle rewards such as her identification of herself through the relationship. She may find her relationship rewarding because it gratifies a need for her that she perceives she cannot fulfill through the broader social world. Furthermore, the perception of irretrievable investments may trap a woman in an abusive relationship, even if she is dissatisfied, especially if she lacks desirable alternatives. Finally, it should be noted that no research was presented concerning the effect of an abused woman’s subjective norm on her stay/leave decision-making process. Currently, the influence of social networks on abusive relationships is unknown. In sum, the studies reviewed present evidence relevant to the first step of this conceptual model of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes.

CAN I DO IT?

Whether a woman believes she can leave her relationship successfully appears to be a result of her assessment of the resources available to her for overcoming various barriers. Research suggests that efficacious individuals tend to show greater motivation and exert more effort and perseverance when dealing with negative life events than do individuals with less self-efficacy who tend to give up more easily (Bandura, 1982, 1989). Furthermore, research indicates that individuals who feel a sense of personal control in coping situations exert more effort (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Brunstein & Olbrich, 1985; Wheaton, 1982), seek or make better use of social support (Hobfoll & Leiberman, 1987; Sandler & Lakey, 1982; Sarason & Sarason, 1982), have a wider repertoire of coping
resources at their disposal (Parkes, 1984), and make use of more successful coping strategies (Anderson, 1977; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992).

Personal Resources and Barriers

One of the most serious personal barriers encountered by abused women during their stay/leave decision-making process appears to be the deficits associated with learned helplessness as documented by Walker (1979). Strikingly similar detrimental effects of abuse have been reported by several researchers. For example, Campbell (1989) found that abused women scored lower than normative groups on measures of self-esteem and evidenced frequent and severe symptoms of stress and grief. Likewise, abused women have been shown to exhibit significantly poorer problem-solving skills and more passivity than nonbattered women (Launius & Lindquist, 1988). In addition, battered women in Strube and Barbour’s (1983) study said that fear was a reason for tolerating abuse.

Structural Resources and Barriers

With regard to structural resources and barriers, economic factors appear to be central issues associated with an abused woman’s perceived ability to leave her relationship successfully. Abused women’s unemployment has been associated with staying in, or returning to, an abusive relationship, whereas having a job has been associated with successful separation (Aguirre, 1985; Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; I. Johnson, 1992; Strube & Barbour, 1983). Two studies draw specific attention to the connection between an abused woman’s employment status and her perception of control over her staying in or leaving the relationship. For example, I. Johnson (1992) found that for severely abused women who sought refuge from a shelter, “it was not income that influenced the victim’s decision to stay in the abusive relationship but rather her lack of ability to control a portion of the income through employment” (p. 174). Likewise, Strube and Barbour (1983) found that women who cited subjective feelings of economic dependence as a reason for initially staying in abusive relationships were more likely to have maintained those relationships at a 1- to 18-month follow-up. Women’s subjective feelings of economic dependence had a small but significant positive correlation with their employment status. Thus having the opportunity and ability to provide for oneself financially has important implications for abused women’s beliefs that they can successfully leave their relationships.
In addition to employment, a needs assessment of 141 women exiting an emergency shelter indicated that abused women are in need of numerous community resources to live independently of their abusers (Sullivan, Basta, Tan, & Davidson, 1992). These additional resources include legal assistance, housing, and physical protection. Furthermore, there is evidence that without the assistance of a specially trained advocate, abused women may have difficulty accessing these resources on their own (Sullivan & Davidson, 1991).

Unfortunately, abused women who do access and use community resources do not consistently find them to be effective (Aguirre, 1985; Bowker & Maurer, 1987). Among a national survey sample of 854 abused women who responded to a "Woman's Day" magazine advertisement, Bowker and Maurer found the police, social service and counseling agencies, and lawyers to be the most heavily used resources. Fifty percent of the participants in this study rated lawyers as very or somewhat effective in helping them deal with violence, whereas the police and social service agencies were not rated as very or somewhat effective by even half of the respondents. Women's groups were most likely to be rated as effective; however, they were only used by 21% of the participants. These findings suggest that receiving ineffective assistance may serve as structural barriers that limit abused women's beliefs in their ability to leave their relationships.

An extreme example of a structural barrier is provided by Avni (1991) who conducted phenomenological interviews with 35 Israeli abused women. These women were found to be forcibly imprisoned in their homes. They stayed in their relationships because it was physically impossible for them to unconfine themselves. Imprisonment would certainly be considered a structural barrier that prohibits leaving.

On a more optimistic note, a few studies have found evidence of structural resources that appear to facilitate a woman's exit from an abusive relationship. Women who file assault charges, attain a restraining order, or stay at a shelter for a long period of time are more likely to leave their abusive relationships successfully (Snyder & Scheer, 1981; Strube & Barbour, 1984). Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that abused women who have a solid base of personal and structural resources available to them, and few barriers to overcome, will likely feel in control of their circumstances and believe they can leave their relationships successfully.
IMPLICATIONS

The bulk of research on marital and dating violence appears to rest on an assumption that all abused women want, or should want, to leave their relationships. The model proposed herein challenges this assumption by recognizing that some abused women may not wish to leave their relationships. According to the model, an abused woman may choose to remain in her relationship because (a) she feels satisfied with the relationship, (b) her best available alternative is not attractive enough to entice her to leave, (c) her significant others want her to maintain the relationship and she wishes to comply with their expectations, and/or (d) she has invested heavily in the relationship. This theoretical perspective does not imply that abused women are masochistic and/or that they do not wish for the violence against them to stop. It simply acknowledges that some women, although abused, may choose to stay in their relationships. This conceptual approach to understanding abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes highlights Lloyd’s (1990) finding that violence does not always occur within the context of marital distress. Likewise, Jacobson (1993) found that marital violence often occurs during the absence of marital conflict. Studies such as these represent a shift in emphasis from most existing research and offer the potential for identifying more about the underlying factors involved in women’s decisions to stay in abusive relationships.

The first step of the model suggests several promising areas of study for further investigations of abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes. One such potential avenue for future research includes asking abused women not “Why do you stay?” but rather, “What aspects of your relationship do you find satisfying?” or “What specific personal needs do you feel are fulfilled in your relationship?” Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) examined the role that relationship categories such as intimacy, sex, emotional involvement, companionship, intellectual involvement, and a sense of security and self-worth played in the stay/leave decisions of daters in nonabusive relationships. The extent that daters felt that these needs were satisfied in their current relationship, but not in alternate relationships, significantly differentiated those that remained in their relationships from those who voluntarily left. According to the proposed model, knowledge of relationship categories of need satisfaction such as these and others are relevant to abused women’s feelings that they will have a better overall
quality of life by remaining in their relationships. Thus research that focuses on specific sources of need satisfaction with abused women likely will provide a fuller understanding of the underlying dynamics involved in the first step in their stay/leave decision-making processes.

The proposed model also identifies an abused woman’s perception of irretrievable investments as a reason for remaining in her relationship. Thus far, irretrievable investments of abused women have been measured only in terms of the length or duration of their relationships. It is possible, and probable, that other factors (e.g. self-disclosure, delaying one’s career to nurture one’s husband and/or children) that have yet to be studied are perceived as irretrievable investments by abused women and are thus relevant to their stay/leave decision-making processes. Many investments, however, may actually be retrievable. For example, an abused woman who has worked for several years while her husband attended medical school may consider her years of work as an investment toward the goal of becoming the wife of a doctor. She may consider this investment irretrievable if she were to leave the relationship. Another abused woman in the same situation, however, may realize that she gained valuable skills during these years of work and that she will take these skills with her when she leaves. Thus the second woman may view her years of work as quite retrievable. Whether abused women view certain investments as irretrievable or not is an important area of inquiry with the potential to greatly inform the understanding of abused women’s stay/leave decisions. Exploratory studies are needed to examine investments that abused women consider retrievable versus irretrievable in their relationships.

Studies that directly assess abused women’s perceptions of relationship alternatives also are needed. Other than knowing that some abused women may initially remain in their relationships because they perceive they have nowhere else to go, there exists a lack of information about abused women’s perceptions of the range of options available to them. Research suggests that some abused women perceive alternatives to their relationships yet do not evaluate their relationships as costly enough, or their best alternative as rewarding enough, to warrant choosing the alternative (Pfouts, 1978). Future studies are needed to assess the ways in which relationship satisfaction and quality of alternatives may be related in the realm of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes.

With regard to subjective norm, there exists virtually no research on what an abused woman’s significant others think of her relationship. Do they approve or disapprove of the violence against her? Would they encourage her to stay or leave? What are the characteristics of friends who
would encourage her to stay as compared to the characteristics of friends who would encourage her to leave? Are these characteristics personal or are they linked to friends' own relationship dynamics? Studies of marital and dating violence have yet to include the significant others of abused women and ask these questions of them. Furthermore, how abused women perceive the thoughts of their significant others also remains unknown. Studies are needed to investigate the answers to these questions as well as to assess the effect of an abused woman's subjective norm on her stay/leave decision.

Turning to the second step in abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes, the model suggests that personal and structural resources and barriers influence an abused woman's beliefs about whether she can leave her relationship successfully. Researchers and professionals who work with battered women already know that women who are employed and have the financial resources to establish an independent living arrangement and support themselves and their children are more likely to leave an abusive relationship than are women who lack economic resources (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Strube, 1988; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). However, women who lack the motivation to help themselves and believe they have no control over their situation also may feel inhibited from leaving. Empirical studies are needed to determine the relative contributions of personal and structural resources and barriers to the question "Can I do it?"

Taken as a whole, the model implies that factors that may contribute to why a woman initially remains committed to an abusive relationship may be irrelevant to why she eventually leaves. This implication highlights Strube and Barbour's (1983, 1984) findings as well as the recent work of Rosen and Stith (1995). These studies suggest that abused women undergo a paradigmatic shift whereby their commitment to a course of action changes from a strong feeling of couple identity (i.e., "I have to be in this relationship") to one of survival (i.e., "I have to get out of this relationship") (Rosen & Stith, 1995). These types of studies are new to the literature on relationship violence and stay/leave decision-making processes and represent fruitful avenues for future research.

The proposed model identifies two separate questions relevant to abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes, yet it also points to the importance of understanding how these two questions are interrelated. It is likely that the two steps operate in a cyclical fashion. For example, an abused woman may decide she is dissatisfied with her relationship and wants to leave, but she may perceive she lacks the
necessary resources for doing so. She may be an efficacious woman who believes she can leave successfully, but also believes that leaving would take tremendous effort on her part. If she believes that it will be easier for her to stay in her current relationship, these feelings may translate into relationship rewards that affect her original decision concerning her overall quality of life. In other words, she may use the decision outcome from the question “Can I do it?” to reverse her decision outcome from the question “Will I be better off?” In this way a loop is formed between the two steps of the model with the decision outcome of the second step affecting the decision outcome of the first step.

Thinking about the two steps of the model in this way enables one to consider the implications of the experience of cycling through the model more than once. For example, abused women may now be asked to describe not only their answers to the questions “Will I be better off?” and “Can I do It?” but also, how many times they have considered each question and how the answers to the two questions may differ and change for a woman who is asking herself these questions for the first time, the third time, or the hundredth time. Perhaps a woman who comes back to the question “Will I be better off?” again and again may come to believe that the reason she keeps coming back to the question is because she really is not happy in her relationship. It may be only through this process of returning and re-returning to the question that she discovers this fact about her satisfaction with the relationship. Thus an abused woman’s ultimate decision to stay in or leave her relationship may be reached by considering the questions posed by this model in a variety of different ways, each of which bears its own unique implications for women in abusive relationships. The idea that different paths of decision making may lead to staying in or leaving an abusive relationship highlights the complexity of this decision for abused women. Clearly, studies are needed to document the reciprocal influences of these two central questions on abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes.

Because abused women’s stay/leave decisions are ultimately decisions to either maintain or dissolve their relationships, future investigators may gain further understanding of abused women’s stay/leave decision-making processes by studying additional models of the dynamics in close relationships. M. Johnson’s (1991) commitment framework may prove especially useful in this regard. The thesis of Johnson’s model is that individuals remain committed to relationships because they feel that they want to, ought to, or have to. The model is phenomenological in nature and anchored in symbolic interaction theory. Several components of Johnson’s model are similar to aspects of the model proposed herein. For example,
Johnson's construct of personal commitment, that is, staying in a relationship because one wants to, is similar to the question "Will I be better off?" In addition, Johnson's construct of structural commitment, that is, staying in a relationship because one has to, is similar to the question "Can I do it?" The commitment framework, however, includes an element of moral commitment that is not included in the present model and, as yet, has not been addressed in the literature on marital and dating violence. It is possible that staying in a relationship because one feels one ought to may be relevant to abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes. This possibility highlights the importance of comparing the proposed stay/leave decision-making model to other models of relationship commitment and dissolution. By comparing this model to other generic models of stay/leave decision making, additional factors may be identified that further clarify the processes underlying abused women's stay/leave decisions. Also, comparison of the model to other models may help researchers discover the extent to which abused women's stay/leave decision-making processes are similar to the stay/leave decision-making processes of individuals in nonabusive relationships.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual model presented in this article represents an attempt to develop a model of stay/leave decision-making processes within the specific context of abusive relationships. The model grew out of Strube's (1988) initial attempt to organize research and theory in this field. Based on the proposed model and a review of relevant literature, it is evident that untangling the dynamics involved in abusive relationships is a complicated matter that requires intensive study. It is hoped that the development of this model will help guide future research that will clarify the factors involved in how an abused woman decides whether she will be better off with or without her relationship, and whether she perceives she can leave successfully.

REFERENCES


