‘ISN’T THAT THE CYCLE?’: AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF VIOLENCE AMONG LOW-INCOME WOMEN

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of MARISA VIVIANA CERVANTES find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

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Derived from social learning theory, the intergenerational transmission of violence, or cycle of violence, posits that violent behavior learned in childhood tends to carry on into later life phases. Whereas most research focuses on the likelihood of perpetration of violence, this study examines the intergenerational cycle of victimization. Using a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 24 low-income women living in a sprawling region of eastern Washington State, this study illustrates the complexity of abusive interpersonal relationships, and the decision-making processes that women undergo. The sample of victims of domestic violence offers insight to the experiences of low-income women who are often excluded from studies of intimate partner violence. Findings reveal a pattern of tolerance associated with the internalization and normalization of violent behavior, difficulty in recognizing signs of intimate partner abuse, and the downplaying of abusive experiences. Efforts of interrupting cycles of violence illustrate how children are often motivators for women’s enactment of agency in negotiating their relationships and attempting to be better mothers for their children.
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Dedication

I dedicate this first and foremost to my mom.

Thank you for your love and sacrifices;

I’m making the distance worth it.

And to the victims, survivors, and resistors of domestic abuse,

I recognize and applaud you—

The strength and resilience needed to get through your daily lives matters.

Thank you for sharing your stories.
INTRODUCTION

Ethel Moore\(^1\), a 73-year-old resident of the Riverway region in eastern Washington State, graciously opened her home to sit for an interview in the summer of 2010. As she described her life experiences, incidents of physical and emotional abuse were common throughout multiple phases of her life. As a young girl, she and her siblings were constantly abused at the hands of their father. She described her father as being “horrible”, someone who “beat the boys unmercifully” and at one point made her want to kill herself. She said, “Well I just didn’t see any way out. I had a father who I couldn’t imagine living my life [with] at home.” In an effort to escape the hostile environment in which she lived, Ethel married her first husband at the age of sixteen. Unbeknownst to her, however, he became an abusive man who would throw things at her, hit her and “just knock me cold.” As terrible as her situation sounds, she was not the only one to be subjected to his abuse; Ethel’s daughters also suffered a number of beatings. To protect them from his abuse, Ethel threatened her husband with arrest by going to the police: “And so, that solved that problem. So that it was just me that he took it out on. And that’s okay. I mean, I felt like I deserved it because I married him and stayed in that marriage.”

Oftentimes when domestic violence disputes are highlighted in the media or in everyday life, a common question asked is, ‘why did she stay with him?’ Studies of public perception have found the belief that women are capable of exiting violent relationships, and failure to do so implies victim’s permission for continued abuse (Worden & Carlson, 2005). While to some, leaving an abusive relationship may seem like an easy decision, like many women in the present sample, Ethel was raised in a household where violence was prevalent and one from which her own mother did not flee. Ethel’s mother taught her, “…once you got married, you never left that

\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
person.” In describing her childhood, family life, and relationships, Ethel illustrated the ways in which she learned to tolerate violence throughout her life. Her early exposure to violence essentially normalized intimate partner abuse, which was linked to an internalized expectation of abuse from men in her life. The early experiences of violence were also associated with Ethel downplaying the impact of her abusive marriage. She felt that she had no choice in the matter, since she chose to marry him and therefore must bear the consequences of her decision. As a parent, however, she learned to negotiate her situation in order to protect her children and shield them from her husband’s abuse. Essentially, she made an attempt to interrupt the cycle of violence.

The common rhetoric of victim-blaming that exists in society, in which people deem the public issue of domestic violence as a personal problem (Berns, 1999; Worden & Carlson, 2005), fails to understand the complexity of the situations. Results from this study highlight the complexity of abusive interpersonal relationships, and the decision-making processes that women undergo. Based on qualitative interviews with low-income women in a sprawling region of eastern Washington State, this paper examines women’s lived experiences as they illustrate the intergenerational transmission of violence, and its impact on their lives. With a focus on individual life experiences, this study demonstrates the ways in which girls learn to internalize early experiences of violent behavior as normal and expected components of relationships, and how it is associated with the likelihood of tolerating abuse throughout their lives.

The exposure to violence in childhood—either through the direct experience of abuse or by witnessing interparental domestic violence—can be the onset of a cycle of victimization that carries on throughout a woman’s life course. Through internalizing violent behavior as young girls, women in the present sample often became more likely to tolerate abuse as adults. In many
instances, they were unable to recognize warning signs of an abusive partner and were subsequently re-victimized. Following the recognition of an unhealthy relationship, they then negotiated their situations, and decided whether to stay and endure the abuse, or to leave their partners. However, the majority of these women downplayed the impacts of their experiences in abusive relationships, and typically did not consider the abuse itself enough of a reason to leave their abusers. For those who were mothers, this process of negotiation had larger implications, as it determined whether their children would be subjected to abuse, and continue the intergenerational transmission of violence. Although many women did not view themselves as being caught in a cycle of victimization, their narratives demonstrated the ways in which early exposure to violence was associated with their later life experiences, as partners of abusive men and as mothers.

The patterns that arose in this study elucidate a gendered intergenerational cycle of violence that results in victimization, rather than perpetration, in interpersonal relationships, which existing literature has not studied extensively. Given that participants in the present study were not chosen based on their identification as victims, their narratives illustrate the benefit of utilizing alternative sampling strategies to study family and intimate partner violence. The use of this sample also contributes to existing literature regarding the cycle of victimization by offering a lens into the experiences of women with long histories of abuse and illustrating the processes that they undergo in navigating through abusive relationships across the life course. The interpretation of the data that follows serves to demonstrate the complexity that exists within families afflicted by violence and some of the underlying mechanisms that reproduce victimization intergenerationally.
BACKGROUND

The Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

The intergenerational transmission (IGT) of violence, or the cycle of violence theory, is derived from social learning theory, which posits that children learn behavior through the direct behavioral conditioning and imitation of behavior that they have observed and/or have seen rewarded by others (Bandura, 1977). Children who grow up in families in which they have experienced child abuse or witnessed interparental (mother-to-father or father-to-mother) violence are more likely to imitate these behaviors, compared to children who grow up in nonviolent homes.

Within the dialogue regarding the IGT of violence, the majority of research is generally centered around the perpetration of violence, (Widom, 1989; O’Keefe, 1998; Black et al., 2010; Franklin & Kercher, 2012), wherein men are typically responsible for the behavior as a result of the influences of their violent childhood experiences. For example, Ehrensaft and colleagues (2003) find that when boys grow up in abusive homes, their risk of becoming perpetrators of intimate partner violence increases—they are twice as likely if they are victims of child abuse, and three times as likely when they grow up witnessing domestic violence—compared to those who do not experience childhood abuse.

Similarly, children (especially girls) who are exposed to these types of violence are also more likely to tolerate this behavior and become re-victimized in adulthood. Approximately 46 percent of female victims of childhood abuse grow up to be battered in adulthood. They are twice as likely to experience intimate partner violence as adults, compared to women who were not physically assaulted as children (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).
Life course scholars suggest that values, skills, and behaviors learned early in life tend to be linked to later life experiences through interpersonal interactions and the environments in which they are associated (McLeod & Almazan, 2003). Therefore, growing up in an environment (i.e., household) where violent behavior is prevalent socializes children to understand it as a normal component of intimate relationships. As Hattery and Smith (2017) note, although some critics of the IGT of violence say that the term implies a genetic transmission, the cycle of violence is in fact reproduced because violent behavior is taught to children by the ways in which parents or caretakers navigate their intimate relationships. Through the exposure to violence, parents condition the behavior to their children, increasing the likelihood to replicate what they have seen once they form their own relationships.

**Studying Family Violence**

Early studies of family violence utilized the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) in an effort to understand the cycle of violence. The CTS was first used by Murray Straus, a well-known scholar within the family violence literature. Straus along with his colleague Richard Gelles, published studies contending a gender symmetry of intimate partner violence using the CTS (Straus 1990a; Straus 1990b; Straus & Gelles, 1986). The CTS lists eighteen acts intended to measure three constructs of conflict: reasoning; verbal aggression; and physical aggression or violence, which is divided into minor violence and severe violence. Based on the results of the
survey, the authors claim that intimate partner violence victimization is not one-sided, but rather that husbands are just as likely to be beaten by their wives. ²

Although their findings are derived from two nationally representative samples, and deemed generalizable to the overall population, other scholars (e.g., Dobash et al., 1992) point out the how the CTS’s attempt at objectivity actually conflates the reality of the situation. For example, solely counting an object thrown at one’s spouse as an act of violence does not distinguish the type of object, nor the context under which it was thrown. Throwing a pillow during a trivial dispute is vastly different than throwing a skillet in the middle of a heated argument, yet both situations would be given the same weight and considered equally violent acts. The failure to account for contextual factors does not allow for an accurate depiction of marital conflict or the degree of violence within a household, and thus produces an inaccurate representation of spousal abuse. Therefore, qualitative studies that can account for the contextual nuances within familial conflicts can drastically alter the narrative that quantitative studies attempt to convey.

Following the critiques of Dobash and colleagues (1992), caution should be taken when engaging with studies that use the CTS to measure violence and abuse in the home. O’Keefe (1998) for example, uses a modified version of the CTS to measure interparental violence and the experience of child abuse among adolescent dating. In her methodology, she asks adolescents to “consider the ‘worst year’ of their childhood” as they respond to the questionnaire and indicate “the frequency with which they witnessed their parents use violent tactics” toward each other and toward the respondent (p. 45). Though her findings align with the IGT of violence, in

² The definition used in the CTS excludes sexual violence, which accounts for the findings of gender symmetry in spousal abuse.
that high percentages of adolescents who witnessed and experienced abuse as children had inflicted or were recipients of dating violence, using a scale in which teenagers are self-reporting on the “worst year” of their childhood fails to account for contextual nuance, much like that of the CTS studies of supposed gender-symmetry of spousal abuse by Straus and Gelles.

Similarly, Heyman and Smith Slep’s (2002) study makes use of a modified CTS in their attempt to measure adulthood family violence resulting from child abuse and interparental violence. For parents with two or more children, one child was randomly chosen as the target about whom all parenting questions were asked. While this may not seem greatly problematic given the large sample (N=6,002), research has shown that all children are not treated the same (Conley, 2005). Therefore, if by chance, the randomly chosen child happens to be the one that is treated significantly better or worse than the others, results regarding the perpetration of child maltreatment may not be accurately recorded and thus misrepresented. This is not to say that all studies using nationally representative samples cannot accurately gauge family violence, but those that utilize the CTS, or a modified version of it, often omit the significance of social context.

Some studies attempt to examine the likelihood of both perpetration and victimization as a result of growing up in violent homes. Although Anderson’s (2002) analysis addresses the problems in separating perpetration and victimization studies, her findings indicate similar patterns regarding the asymmetrical nature of intimate partner violence, with men frequently perpetrating violence and women receiving it. Additionally, despite finding a weak-to-moderate relationship between growing up in a violent home and subsequently becoming part of a violent marital relationship, Stith and colleagues (2000) report a significant probability to becoming a victim of violence if one was abused as a child.
Despite the prevalence of childhood abuse, victimization in adulthood as an outcome of the cycle of violence has not been studied extensively. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) report findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, a study conducted in 1995-1996 which utilized a nationally representative sample of men and women who disclosed that they had been victimized at any point in their lives. The study reports at least half (51.9 percent) of the surveyed women being physically assaulted as a child by a parent or adult caretaker. Additionally, 17.6 percent of all the women surveyed report being a victim of rape (completed or attempted) and more than half (54 percent) of them experienced it before the age of eighteen. Though the rates of childhood abuse are high, only physical assaults are considered in Tjaden and Thoennes’s (2000) report. The effects of indirect exposure to violence also warrant closer inspection in studying family violence.

Edelson (1999) recognizes the importance of children’s exposure to adult domestic violence; in addition to the direct eye witnessing of adult physical violence, the author includes hearing the events and seeing the aftermath in his definition of the ways in which children experience domestic violence. Both the direct and indirect exposure negatively affect children, including behavioral, emotional, cognitive-functioning, and other developmental problems. However, he notes that there are gendered effects in the resulting behaviors of the affected children, wherein boys tend to demonstrate more externalizing behaviors, while girls show more internalized behaviors. The implications are that children begin to normalize the violence, but react in gender-specific ways.

Importantly, for the purposes of this study, the internalizing behaviors that girls display point to the likelihood of them understanding violence as part of intimate relationships and something that they will tolerate throughout their lifetime. As this analysis will demonstrate, the
internalization of violent behaviors affects women’s abilities to recognize early signs of abuse from an intimate partner. Subsequently, the impacts of the abuse that they have experienced are often downplayed. In dealing with their experiences of abuse, women are left in a position in which they must negotiate their situations and decide what action to take next. In essence, this study will expand upon the existing, but limited, literature and illustrate some of the ways that exposure to childhood abuse creates a pathway to abuse in adulthood, as well as how the cycle of victimization is reproduced through the processes that women utilize in navigating their interpersonal relationships.

**Intimate Partner Violence: Definitions and Prevalence Rates**

As social learning theory contends, behavior learned early in life tends to be imitated and tolerated throughout later life stages. The experience of violence, particularly child sexual and physical abuse, influences the types of relationships an individual will form as an adult (English, 1998; Elliott et al., 2002; Cherlin et al., 2004). Cherlin and colleagues (2004) examine the role of the trauma of physical and sexual childhood abuse, as well as witnessing adult domestic and sexual violence, and the influence it has on the formation of intimate unions in adulthood. The authors find that women who have been abused are less likely to be in healthy, sustained marital or cohabiting unions, and are also more likely to have experienced abuse in their intimate relationships. Furthermore, those who have experienced abuse beginning in childhood are also more likely to go through multiple short-term relationships, which the authors label transitory unions.
Regardless of childhood exposure to violence, the salience of intimate partner abuse warrants in-depth examinations. Although common understandings of violence in intimate relationships are typically related to physical assaults, such as hitting, slapping, and choking, abuse manifests in several different ways. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define four main types of intimate partner violence: physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression. Physical violence is defined as “the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury, or harm”. Within sexual violence, attempted or completed acts include: rape or penetration, forcing a victim to penetrate someone else, pressured unwanted penetration in a non-physical manner (verbal pressure, intimidation, or misuse of authority), unwanted sexual contact, and non-contact unwanted sexual experiences (e.g., exposure to sexual situations, verbal or behavioral sexual harassment, unwanted and/or disseminated filming/photography of a sexual nature). Stalking is defined as “a pattern of repeated, unwanted, attention and contact that causes fear or concern for one’s own safety or the safety of someone else.” Lastly, psychological aggression is “the use of verbal and non-verbal communication with the intent to harm another person mentally or emotionally and/or to exert control over another person” (cdc.gov, 2016).

Psychological abuse most often results from an abuser’s efforts of obtaining and maintaining power and control over one’s partner. As the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project’s (Pence & Paymar, 1993) graphic representation (i.e., the power and control wheel) illustrates, power and control appears in various forms. The wheel specifies eight mechanisms that abusers utilize: using coercion and threats; intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; using children; male privilege; economic abuse; and minimizing, denying and blaming. Oftentimes,
these acts are the ones that victims fail to recognize as forms of abuse, but have the biggest and longest-lasting impacts on a victim of domestic abuse, discussed more below.

In a study for the CDC’s Division of Violence Prevention, Breiding and colleagues (2014) estimate that one in four women will be a victim of physical violence by an intimate partner. The study estimates 71.1 percent of women first experienced sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner before age twenty-five. Of those, 23.2 percent experienced these types of intimate partner violence before age eighteen. Rennison and colleagues (2013) further illustrate that compared to more densely populated areas, rural women are at a higher risk of experiencing intimate partner violence. They report that “25.2% of all violence against women in rural areas is perpetrated by an intimate partner. In contrast, 19.2% of violence directed toward urban females and 21.0% of violence directed toward suburban females are committed by an intimate” (p. 1318). Furthermore, while women of all socioeconomic classes experience intimate partner violence, research shows that it is not evenly distributed. Women in lower socioeconomic classes experience a disproportionate level of abuse, compared to women in wealthier households (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Resko, 2010), wherein their risk is up to four times higher (Browne et al, 1999). The prevalence of intimate partner violence and the high rates at which women will experience it makes this a grave public health issue.

*The Effects of Intimate Partner Violence*

For many women, warning signs of an abusive partner are not always easily recognized, as mentioned above. For example, in Potter’s (2008) study of battered African American women, most of the women in her sample did not consider themselves to be in abusive relationships until
the first physical altercation occurred, despite having had experienced verbal and emotional abuse or controlling behaviors from their partners. The author attributes the women’s inability to recognize the onset of abuse in their relationships because they had been exposed to similar, and oftentimes worse, behavior in their upbringing. Through their narratives, it became apparent how they had internalized the behavior and downplayed the impact that their early experiences with domestic violence (both direct and indirect) had on them as adults. Therefore, women who have been subjected to abuse become accustomed to it and are less able to recognize warning signs, or psychological aggression, of potential physical abuse before it is too late. Additionally, studies have demonstrated how abused women fall into patterns of abusive partners (Bell, 2003; Cherlin et al., 2004;). These cycles in which women go from one abusive relationship to another, further illustrate the difficulty that women have in recognizing the signs of abuse, although for many, women learn how to escape relationships and their abusers quicker and subsequent unions tend to be of a shorter duration (Potter, 2008).

Consumed by this cycle of intimate partner violence, it can be difficult for victims to fully acknowledge the extent to which the abuse affects them. In addition to the declination of mental and physical health, employment and housing stability are largely disrupted during efforts to escape their abusive environments. Especially for poor and low-income women who hold disadvantaged social positions, the effects that intimate partner violence have on their paid work, or other types of income generation, largely impact other arenas of their lives. Though women face many obstacles in obtaining and maintaining employment, such as through hiring discrimination, work-family conflict, or glass ceiling effects, women who are victims of domestic violence have an additional layer of difficulty, especially for those who lack higher-level skills and/or education.
The mental effects alone, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and general anxiety disorder, have been shown to lead to low levels of social support, diminished self-esteem, reduced quality of life, and elevated negative social problem-solving skills (Beck et al., 2014). Symptoms of depression, such as low self-esteem, lead to a lower sense of self where individuals feel as though they are unworthy or not suited to meet the expectations set for them in their personal and professional lives. Victims of intimate partner violence also exhibit poorer physical health, as a result of the psychological distress (Romero et al., 2003; Leone et al, 2004), leading them to have to take time off of work, and feeling like they are unable to complete tasks at work. Furthermore, the physical injuries that battered women endure also impact their ability to work. Women seeking medical attention for physical injuries such as broken bones or severe scratches, burns, or bruises, are likely to miss more days of work and have lower rates of productivity while on the job (Browne et al., 1999; Leone et al, 2004).

Another way that abused women’s work is negatively impacted is through an abuser’s efforts at obtaining and maintaining power and control within their relationships. This type of control that abusers exert is also known as financial (or economic) abuse, which the National Network to End Domestic Violence deem one of the most powerful methods used by abusers to keep victims trapped in their abusive relationships (nnedv.org, 2017). Although financial abuse is one of the less commonly understood forms of abuse, the enduring impacts largely diminish a victim’s ability to stay safe. Financial abuse manifests in several different ways, both subtle and overt, but all with the intent of gaining and maintaining financial control over a partner. For example, sabotaging a woman’s ability to work, such as destroying credentials or keeping keys, computers, or work uniforms away from the woman so that she is unable to adequately perform her duties (Moe & Bell, 2004) is one form of financial abuse. Women may lose their jobs as a
result, quit due to safety concerns, or even be prohibited by their partners from working at all (Raphael, 1996; Lloyd, 1997; Sable et al., 1999; Moe & Bell, 2004).

When women have to take time off, are being sabotaged by their partners, or feel that they are in danger, losing a job is often a consequence that they must bear. Whether that means getting fired for not performing their jobs well enough or missing too many days, or choosing to resign in order to escape their abuser, the women are further disadvantaged. Oftentimes, making the decision to quit a job also means leaving the home they share with an abusive partner, leading to a greater loss of stability in their lives.

The economic consequences that ensue as a result of abuse typically lead to women’s lowered socioeconomic status. For those who may be prohibited from working or do not choose to leave their abuser, the financial dependency that they have on the men increases the complexity of their situation and decreases their ability to leave, while also creating a heightened vulnerability to other forms of abuse as they are further constrained from a lack of financial independence. Several women who are able to escape often are left to seek out support elsewhere, such as welfare and other government assistance (Strube & Barbour, 1983; Lloyd & Taluc, 1999; Adams et al., 2012). While shifting economic dependency from an abuser to the state (through welfare assistance) may seem favorable, women oftentimes must nonetheless depend on their ex-partners for other needs (Scott et al., 2002; Purvin, 2007). Due to the small amounts of assistance that women on welfare receive and the inability to make ends meet, they often rely on their abusers for other types of aid, such as childcare and transportation, for which they cannot afford to pay. As a whole, the disruptions in employment, whether through a victim’s efforts to escape, being controlled by an abusive partner, or the diminished mental
health that come with intimate partner violence influence the sense of stability that women have in their lives and typically place them at a greater disadvantage.

The ways in which victims of intimate partner violence internalize their victimization, and downplay the impacts of the abuse they endure, is important for understanding how they enact agency in navigating through their abusive relationships. As Hattery and Smith (2017) mention, despite the fact that many people believe abused women have no agency or do not know how to make good choices, in most cases, this is not true. In fact, they often have a clear understanding of the trade-offs they are making and act in ways that will give them what they need most in the moment.

Life course scholars have discussed the role of agency in decision making, and the influence that early life experiences have on the “exercise of situationally based judgement” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, 994). The use of past experiences in the evaluation of choice and decision making, wherein early experiences create schemas from which people draw upon when faced with similar situations, is crucial to understanding the choices that women in cycles of victimization make. When they are in an abusive relationship, women often use what they know in choosing what action to take. This usually means that they either follow the same script that they were taught as children and adolescents, or they act in a way that goes against what they know. As the narratives of the women in this study will show, the experience of early abuse tends to be linked to women’s agency in later life decisions, whether they fully recognize it or not.
Sampling Strategies for Studying Victims of Domestic Violence

Most research on intimate partner violence tends to be based on samples of women accessing sources of help, either for domestic abuse in particular, or other sources of aid. Data typically come from shelters (Johnson, 1995; Moe & Bell, 2004), clinical samples (Beck et al., 2014), official records (Jewkes, 2002) and particularly, poor recipients of government assistance (Purvin, 2002; Scott et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2012) who are oftentimes enrolled in job training programs, such as welfare-to-work (Brush, 2000; Bell, 2003; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). The purposive sampling of women from these types of support services is highly useful in attaining a sample of victims and illuminating the experiences and difficulties they have endured, while allowing for a look at the various obstacles they must navigate in addition to the abuse. Understanding the obstacles that women face is necessary for the study of intimate partner violence victimization, especially given the fact that it takes women an average of five attempts to permanently escape an abuser (Okun, 1986).

Within the large body of literature on domestic abuse and women seeking assistance, many of the samples are taken from large cities and urban areas, which are inherently distinct from small towns and rural areas. Although women from both types of communities encounter obstacles in their attempts to access resources, Hall-Sanchez (2014) cites studies which have found that “rural women often have less social support resources (Rennison et al., 2013) and confront social and geographic isolation, absence of or inadequate reliable transportation (Lewis, 2003), and are less likely to be insured, limiting access to health care services (Basile & Black, 2011)” (p. 273).

Although existing studies have provided much insight into the experiences of victims of intimate partner violence, it is important to highlight the narratives of those who do not seek
these types of services, especially those from non-urban areas like eastern Washington State. Many women do not turn to shelters, clinics, or other support centers, despite the abuse they endure. The inclusion of their experiences is necessary in demonstrating that the abuse that occurs behind closed doors is not always revealed to those trained to provide support, yet they are equally important to the discussion. The fact that approximately half of the women in the present sample discussed histories of abuse throughout their lives signifies a need to explore intimate partner violence and domestic abuse outside of shelters, clinics, and welfare offices. There are several reasons why victims would choose not to seek help, such as services not being available or easily accessible, that women feel their circumstances did not require outside assistance, or that dealing with abuse was something they were familiar with. Whatever the reason, there is something to be learned about their experiences.

This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by providing an in-depth look at how victims of abuse navigate complex processes, and how abuse is perpetuated in a cyclical fashion within families. The analysis accounts for the victims and the ways in which childhood exposure to violence, either through direct victimization or witnessing interparental violence, is associated with the likelihood of tolerating abuse in adult intimate unions. The narratives of the women in the present study illustrate the ways in which violent behavior is internalized, in that they have been socialized with abuse as an aspect of intimate relationships, signs of non-physical abuse are not easily recognized, impacts of experiences of domestic violence are downplayed, and how the negotiation of action for self-protection is engaged. Furthermore, through examining the lived experiences of women who did not participate in a study geared towards victims of domestic violence, the narratives provided aid in illuminating an aspect of their lives that they did not intend to share, yet proved to be significant and had lasting impacts on their experiences.
The data used for this paper come from a project conducted by Dr. Jennifer Sherman, who collected the data from August 2010 to August 2011 in the Riverway region of eastern Washington State. The larger research project focused on the experiences of the area’s low-income and poor populations in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Grusky, Western, & Wimer, 2011), seeking a diverse cross-section of adults impacted by the economic downturn. In the past 50 years, much of the farm and orchard lands of the adjoining communities have been taken over with suburban-style housing developments, big-box stores, and strip malls. The area’s growth attracted families from different areas of the country, particularly the Pacific Northwest, as they searched for jobs and low-cost housing in the developing service and construction sectors. However, during the recession, slow economic growth was experienced throughout the region and key sectors such as manufacturing and retail experienced large layoffs. Riverway’s unemployment rate rose to match the state’s rate of more than 9 percent (Morgan et al., 2012; Washington State Employment Security Department, 2012). In this time period, many lower wage workers in Riverway found themselves among the ranks of the underemployed and working poor as well as the nonworking poor (Sherman, 2016).

While the original project consists of fifty-five recorded, open-ended, in-depth interviews, the data used in this study are comprised of a subsample of twenty-four women. Initially, mention of any form of victimization as children or adults was used as a basis from

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3 This section is co-authored with Jennifer Sherman. The information provided appears in Sherman, J. (2016). ‘Stress That I Don’t Need’: Gender Expectations and Relationship Struggles Among the Poor. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, online first.
which to be pulled from the full sample. Although thirteen men reported experiences of abuse during their interviews, none discussed becoming victims (or perpetrators) of abuse as adults. Instead, the majority of abuse mentioned by men was inflicted upon them by their parents or other adult figures during childhood. While male childhood victimization and exposure to violence is important in understanding of the cycle of violence, not enough detail was given by the men to fully analyze the influence it may have had on their adult lives.

Although the exclusion of men’s experiences with childhood violence may bias findings regarding the reproduction of intergenerational domestic violence, the claims made in this study are only about women and the effects of abuse throughout the life course, given that they were willing to reveal more information regarding their experiences with abuse in their adult romantic relationships. While the claims made are not negating the experiences of men’s victimization in childhood, the lack of men’s openness to discuss victimization or perpetration as adults did not permit the inclusion of their narratives for the purposes of this study. There is also the possibility that their reluctance to discuss abuse reflects a gendered pattern in reporting and the greater stigma attached to men’s adult victimization. Therefore, due to the lack of information provided by men, only women are included in the analysis of the cycle of victimization for this study.

Interviews lasted between one and four hours, with an average of an hour and a half, all of which were conducted in person in various locations, including the participants’ residences and public spaces such as private study rooms at public libraries, coffee shops and fast food restaurants, and a local food bank during non-distribution hours. Most of the participants were interviewed alone, although three couples and one pair of friends chose to be interviewed together. Interviews were focused around several thematic areas, including history in the community; family history; work history; leisure; marriage, relationships, and family; religion
and faith; political interests and voting behaviors; and demographics and background information. There was also completely unstructured time at the end of the interview for participants to discuss issues that were important to them. Interviews were semi-structured but open enough for participants to take them in their own desired directions (Sherman, 2016).

Table 1 provides basic demographic information, comparing the subsample of the present study to the full sample and the larger Riverway community. The subsample is reflective of the full sample, in that there are no stark differences in the demographics, with the exception of men. Of the twenty-four participants, the average age is forty-five. Of the larger fifty-five, the average age is forty-four, whereas thirty-three-years-old is the average of the overall community. The subsample is 100 percent female ($n=24$), compared to 62 percent of the full sample and 49.5 percent of the Riverway region. About 67 percent ($n=16$) of the subsample identified as White, which relates to the 71 percent of the full sample and 78.8 percent of Whites in the area; 8 percent of the respondents identified as Latino only. Native Americans were overrepresented in both the subsample and full sample, 8 percent and 13 percent, respectively, in comparison to the 1.7 percent of Riverway. African Americans comprised 4 percent ($n=1$) of the subsample, while they were 7 percent of the full sample and 2.2 percent of the larger community. Lastly, 13 percent ($n=3$) of respondents reported Latino ethnicity with race including White, Black, and Native American, compared to 15 percent and 28.7 percent.
Table 1. Sample Statistics

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Subsample n</th>
<th>Subsample %</th>
<th>Full Sample %</th>
<th>Riverway %&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA-not applicable.

<sup>a</sup> Source: (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). <sup>b</sup> White and Native American mixed respondents were categorized as Native American.

Participants were recruited through various methods, including fliers passed out to clients of local social service providers, snowball sampling from the networks of participants and undergraduate research assistants, and through volunteer work with a local food bank. Gift cards worth $25 were offered as incentives to participants, and recruitment continued until additional interviews ceased to provide additional analytical themes or new perspectives (Sherman, 2016).

Each interview was digitally recorded (with participants’ consent), transcribed verbatim, and shared with the author (after all identifying information was redacted, in accordance with the Institutional Review Board regulations). Data were then analyzed and coded by the author for emerging themes, using a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin & Straus, 2007; LaRossa, 2005). Each interview transcript also included detailed field notes and memos written within 24

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics for Full Sample & Riverway, and notes taken from Sherman (2016).
hours of the interview, which provided additional information regarding the participant and observations from the interview. The qualitative data coding software, NVivo, was then used in multiple rounds of analysis and coding. The first round of open coding was used to identify important concepts and themes such as abuse, relationships, and parenting. Subsequent rounds of coding were undertaken in which identified themes were divided into more specific categories, such as childhood abuse and intimate partner violence. Further analysis then separated types of intimate partner abuse, including physical and verbal abuse. The multiple rounds of analysis allowed for an in-depth examination of the themes and patterns presented in the data, and provided a closer look at the ways in which violence exists in a cyclical nature in the lives of the participants, as well as how the women navigate their interpersonal relationships over the course of their lives.
RESULTS

Exposure to Childhood Abuse

Around 58 percent ($n=14$) of the women mentioned exposure to abuse as children during their interviews. Direct physical or sexual abuse was typically perpetrated by biological fathers and/or stepfathers, and occasionally by other adults (relatives or family friends). Fifty-five-year-old Donna Chavez described her father being very strict and having lots of rules. She explained how she and her siblings would be hit if they did something he did not want: “I got hit with a guitar one time. Yeah, he broke the guitar on my back.” While the guitar was one of the more severe incidents, it was not uncommon for objects, like belts, or fists to be used in her punishments. Christine Gorman, a fifty-two-year-old White woman, had a father who sexually abused her and her five siblings, boys and girls alike. Although all six of them were abused, she said “my big sister got it really bad. I mean, I used to walk in on them and he would come after me an’ threaten to kill us. He’d kill us all or he’d kill mom if we told.” The fear of a death threat being realized is enough to cause a person trauma at any age, yet Christine and her siblings had to suffer in silence whilst being sexually violated as children.

In addition to being subjected to direct forms of violence as children, 38 percent ($n=9$) of the women in Riverway explicitly discussed having witnessed violence between their parents while they were growing up. For most of the women, violence was perpetrated by fathers onto mothers, but stepfathers and mothers’ boyfriends were also perpetrators of the abuse. In response to a question of what it was like growing up, Lindsay Wilson, a thirty-three-year-old White woman, said it was very unstable:
Well, my dad was a bad drunk. I mean, he worked and stuff like that, but he was just a bad drunk. Usually he was very, very quiet and that’s when he wasn’t drinking. But when he was drinking he was just obnoxious and just drunk. And then, my mom just—my dad when he was drunk beating up my mom, treating her like crap.

Although Lindsay did not report being directly abused, witnessing her father’s abusive drunken behavior towards her mother was enough for her to consider her home life unstable. For many of the women, alcohol played a central role in the violence they experienced. Though mothers were also considered alcoholics, the use of alcohol was typically tied to the father figures’ abusive behavior—either inciting or worsening the force and frequency.

Estela Lopez, a Latina in her early sixties, described the abuse her father inflicted upon her family throughout her childhood as being worse when he was under the influence of alcohol. Not only did her father beat his children, but Estela’s mother was also a victim of his abuse. She described her efforts to protect her mother from his abuse and suffering the consequences of the interference:

Q: Was she [your mother] scared of him?
Estela: She was very terrified of him too.
Q: Did he hurt her too?
Estela: Oh, yeah, he was—he would get, kind of, messed up [drunk] and just end up hitting her and I would get in the middle of it.
Q: And try to save her?
Estela: Oh, yeah, too many times, many, many, many times, and I would end up—he would end up, uh, slamming me towards the wall or, or just throwing his fist in my face.

In this respect, she was simultaneously subjected to both direct and indirect abuse. Along with being a witness to the abuse between her parents, Estela inserted herself between them in an effort to save her mother from his rage, and consequently became the recipient of physical abuse that was not initially intended for her.

While most research has shown how the exposure to violence in childhood leads to a
higher probability that individuals will become perpetrators of violence and abuse towards others, namely their intimate partners, the patterns that emerged in the narratives of the twenty-four Riverway women revealed a cycle of victimization instead. The experience of growing up in an environment in which violence and abuse were common occurrences tended to impact the ability for women to recognize signs of abuse from future abusers, and likely contributed to them downplaying the effects of the abuse that they suffered. The internalization of violent behaviors arguably influenced how the women came to understand relationships, and in a sense, led them to expect some sort of abuse from the men in their lives.

*The Need to Get Away*

Just as Ethel Moore’s introductory story demonstrated, a number of the women in Riverway felt the need to get away from their hostile home environments as young adults. For some, this meant marrying at a young age.

My grandmother took me in and the abuse would still happen and finally the state said after I turned fourteen, “No, we are taking her to a girl’s group home.” So, I lived in a group home [in another town] from the age of fourteen until the age of seventeen and I got out, that’s when I met my ex-husband and married him and lived with him for ten years. (Melinda Fowler, 43)

Melinda Fowler is a forty-three-year-old White woman who chose to do her interview with a female friend, Tiffany Boyd. She told many lies and half-truths throughout the interview, which became apparent when she tripped up on them multiple times (yet the fact that she was recounting issues that surrounded trauma from her childhood could be construed as misremembering timelines and/or exact details, rather than intentionally lying). Although she refused to answer many of the questions posed, Melinda confirmed that her ex-husband was abusive, yet declined to answer when asked if her current husband was also abusive. When asked...
if her current husband of fifteen years was good to her she said:

    Melinda: Yes, he is, he is very good to me.
    Tiffany: Very good to you? We weren’t going to lie here?
    Melinda: Be quiet.
    Tiffany: No.
    Interviewer: It’s okay. If she doesn’t want to answer it’s okay.
    Tiffany: No, we’re going to be honest, we’re going to be honest.
    Melinda: I don’t want to talk about it.

Although Melinda did not deny the abuse, but rather evaded discussing the topic, it is clear that she struggled to recognize or admit to the existence of abuse that Tiffany alluded to. However, despite her refusal to discuss her marriage, this exchange makes clear that there was some level of mistreatment and that she was in the midst of victimization.

    Despite her rather inconsistent testimony, Melinda was clear about having been abused by her father since the age of nine and the attempts she made at escaping it, as well as the presence of abuse in her first marriage. Her silence regarding her second husband’s abuse, alluded to by Tiffany, suggests that she did not, or would not, explain what drew her into another abusive relationship. However, her ability to discuss past abuse, but refusal to admit to any present victimization, further suggests the internalization of violence and the downplaying of the effects. She did not want to recognize, or perhaps had not yet examined, what motivated her to remain with a man whom she claimed treated her well—but who clearly did not—despite escaping previous abusive situations.

    Christine Gorman, the victim of sexual abuse mentioned above, conveyed her path in this way:

    I was sixteen-years-old and everybody ended up coming back down to the States—the United States—and [I] got married at seventeen. Up there [in Alaska]. To another abusive
person. You know? I guess you follow what your father—or whatever they say, you know?...I stayed with him for three years. Ran away from him when he was at work.

Although Christine attempted to make sense of the pattern of leaving one abuser (her father) for another (her husband), she did not get very far with it. The fear of her father that she expressed having as a child, and witnessing her mother return to him despite his abuse, left her with an understanding of abusive men and the options she had in dealing with it—either staying and enduring more abuse, or running away from it altogether. In this sense, marrying at a young age was a way to escape her father’s abuse. However, when he became abusive too, she followed the same script as before and ran away from him. Her decision to run away from both of her abusers demonstrates the way in which she exercised agency, based on past experiences, and did what she felt was best to protect herself from further abuse. She expressed a sense of displeasure in the fact that her mother stayed with her abusive father, which suggests that she did not want to follow her mother’s footsteps and continue to endure abuse at the hands of her own husband. Therefore, the only way she knew how to remove herself from her hostile marriage was to run away. Although she did not discuss it explicitly, her story suggests that she was unable to recognize the warning signs of abuse from her husband until it became so bad that she felt her only option was to run away.

Maria Gomez, a fifty-two-year-old Latina who suffered physical and sexual abuse during her childhood from various family members, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, had a similar situation. As a young child, Maria lost several of her family members in a house fire, including both of her parents. She described being abused by an aunt whom she and her siblings lived with for one year:

Maria: She took us in after our parents died and she was an abusive person. She was mean with us.
Q: Did she hit you?
Maria: Oh, she used to beat us with like those electric cords or hit us on the head with the rocks or sticks or whatever. She was a mean person.

After being taken away from that household by Child Protective Services, she and her siblings were sent to live with other family members, and continued to suffer from their abuse (physical and sexual) as well. Eventually, she moved in with her older sister, but the situation was not an improvement. As an adolescent, Maria ran away.

I was fourteen. I ran away from my sister’s house because I didn’t like being there, you know, because I was totally with her [since] I was ten. And my brother-in-law, he was always trying to molest me and all. When my sister got married with him, she had three kids and he molested her daughters, you know for years and years. And one time, I just got tired of it.

Having been subjected to abuse from a very young age, Maria did not have much power to protect herself from the abuse of her family members, but when she was fourteen she took the initiative to escape the sexual advances of her brother-in-law, and ran away to live with her older brother. However, that situation was not ideal either and she wanted to get out of his house, too. Maria discussed how she had gone out with a man a couple of times and found out that he told her brother he wanted to marry her. “I was scared. And then I said yes, but I wanted to get out of the house. And it was worse with my husband, it was.” As evidenced by Maria’s testimony, her early years were filled with a pattern of entering abusive households and finding ways to escape them—at first with the help of family members and Child Protective Services, followed by her own act of physically running away, and then through marriage.

As young women, especially during the time they were growing up (20-40 years ago), women were not expected to leave their parent’s home until they were married. These marriage proposals may have been their first opportunity to escape unbearable home lives. As Ethel
Moore put it, “my other marriages were an extension of my father which I hated. They say that girls do marry like their [fathers]. And when I went with them they were wonderful… When you live with someone just like my father, I hated him. And yet, there’s a love because he is your dad. And that’s the way it was with my marriages.” In her relationships with her father and husbands, Ethel struggled with the notion of loving someone she hated, and hating someone she loved. Despite the abuse from her husbands, she expressed a sense of love for them because of the relationship they had; the abuse itself was not enough to abandon the emotional connection that existed between them. Ethel reflected on her decision to marry young and acknowledged the negative impact that her choice had on her daughter:

Thinking back, I married at sixteen. I didn't have to, but I need[ed] to get away from my father. And so, thinking back, I should have left very early. But I didn't. I wasn't smart enough to even realize what I was doing. I got married, and it wasn't what you think it's going to be, and it cost my daughter a lot of pain.

Although Ethel attributed her failure to recognize what she was doing to her not being smart enough, her narrative demonstrates how she was exposed to a considerable amount of abuse from an early age and as a result, felt the best way to get away from her father was through marriage. However, her efforts at escaping her father’s abuse led her into another abusive relationship, and one that her daughter suffered from too. Ethel struggled to identify a romantic partner who was not also an abuser. For her, love was undistinguishable from abuse.

It is likely that the relationships and marriages the women entered did not start off as the abusive situations that they eventually became, but the narratives of the Riverway women suggest that they were frequently utilized as an avenue through which to escape their childhood abusers. However, the desire to escape the hostile environments in which they grew up did not put them out of harm’s way, but rather put them in a position in which they traded one abuser for
another. Growing up in abusive homes set the tone for what to expect in intimate relationships, which likely meant that abuse became an expectation. Thus, the internalization of this type of violent behavior was associated with the inability to recognize signs of abuse prior to more extreme situations. In turn, it left them susceptible to subsequent victimization, continuing the cycle of violence.

Victimization as an Adult

As adults, 83 percent (n=20) of the women revealed being involved in abusive relationships with male partners. While some discussed having only one abusive partner, most of them found themselves in cycles of victimization in more than one relationship. Maria Gomez, mentioned above, discussed two relationships with men who were abusive. In regards to her first husband, whom she married to escape her brother’s home, she said, “he was a drunk. He used to put a padlock on the outside of the door so I couldn’t get out… He was terrible. He was abusive. He would come home drunk and he beat me.” Despite the abuse, however, she stated her reason for finally leaving him was because she discovered his infidelity.

One of the other men Maria dated also abused her, but in a way that reflected a sense of power and control he wanted to have over her: “He was a jealous man. And I mean he didn’t let me go out nowhere. He would buy groceries. He’d throw out the garbage. He would go to the laundry because he didn’t want nobody to see me.” Although he helped her financially and was good to her children, she said he was too abusive and she would not put up with his drug use after she found out about it. As was true with many of the Riverway women who found themselves in a cycle of abusive relationships, Maria reflected on the pattern that she had with men: “It’s weird that I get these guys, you know…the men that I’ve dated, they’ve always been
like they want me to themselves.”

Maria’s narrative not only illustrates a failure to protect herself from abuse, but also shows that the abuse itself was not always enough of a reason to leave the men she dated. Rather, she felt that their infidelity or drug use were more significant in her decision to end the relationship and leave them. In essence, she downplayed the abuse and tolerated a significant amount of abuse from the men she was with, but would not tolerate other forms of behavior that she deemed unacceptable in a relationship, despite the financial contribution her ex-partner provided. Her lowered socioeconomic status was not a factor in tolerating behavior that she found unacceptable in a relationship.

Similarly, Allison Foster, a thirty-eight-year-old Native American and White woman, witnessed her mother go through several relationships, many of which were with abusive men. At sixteen-years-old, she ran away from home with a man she was dating, similar to other women in Riverway. “I just kind of used him to get out of my house. You know? And then we got married when I was eighteen and then we were divorced by twenty-two.” Following her divorce, Allison had several short-term, abusive relationships. At one point, she had to leave the apartment she and her son were living in with her abusive boyfriend when he was sent to jail. As a result, they had to live in a homeless shelter for about two months. When she attempted to apply for welfare assistance, she was given a different option: “[They] had a program that if you get a job they’ll give you fourteen hundred dollars if you sign that you’re not gonna sign up for assistance for a year, an’ work, an’—whatever. So, okay I can do that. So, I got me a job, and I got the money, and I got us an apartment.” However, when her boyfriend got out of jail, they lived together until Allison decided to leave him:
Q: Why did you split up?
Allison: ‘Cause he was doing drugs really bad and taking my money, and seeing somebody else when I was at work. My little boy told me, ‘My daddy has a girlfriend, she rode in your car’. And, you know? So I was just like, you know what? Enough’s enough.

In this situation, much like Maria, Allison decided she would not tolerate his infidelity or drug use, and chose to leave him because of it. Although leaving him meant giving up the home she and her son lived in and the job she had, their well-being and her peace of mind took precedence.

Estela Lopez, the woman who tried to protect her mother from her father’s drunken rages, self-identified as a victim of domestic violence. She described a relationship she had with a man for about five years: “He beat me up really bad. Messed my head up. He used to hit me and I would land on the floor. Kicked me with his boots. I ended up in the hospital a couple of times with head concussions.” Like Maria, Estela also had a pattern of being with abusive men:

Q: Have you had any more men in your life who weren’t good to you?
Estela: Yeah, I did. That’s why I don’t have any. [laughter] Isn’t that the cycle? I tended to, I guess, fall for the ones that were abusive. I’ve been beaten in the head numerous times, not just two or three times. One doctor said that it was a miracle that I’m still alive.

Whether severely physical or filled with dominance and control, the abuse that the women were subjected to typically was not a one-time occurrence. The numerous altercations that they underwent took a toll on their mental health and sense of self, as well as their perspective of future relationships. As Estela mentioned, her history with abusive men was the reason why she no longer chose to date or be involved romantically with men. Several women in the sample held the same beliefs and chose to opt out of relationships entirely (for more on this issue, see Sherman, 2016).

Stephanie Wilson, the mother of Lindsay Wilson who was introduced earlier, is a fifty-
seven-year-old White woman with an abusive father. During her interview, Stephanie revealed being in a long-term abusive marriage, which included being raped and choked by her alcoholic husband more than once:

Stephanie: That marriage lasted about twenty-seven years…it was a very rocky marriage…there was some abuse. I left him quite a few times, but I always went back.
Q: And how come? Why did you always go back?
Stephanie: I guess low self-esteem. I figured I couldn’t do it on my own. I missed him. I don’t know. I really don’t know why I kept—because there’s times that I got a really good job and was promoted from down there. I had a place to live and had everything going really good. And then I just—it lasted for a while. And then I had to go back. So I really haven’t examined that closely why I did that.

Years after it ended, Stephanie still did not understand why she kept going back to a man who abused her throughout their twenty-seven-year marriage, but recognized her low self-esteem, as well as the impact that it had on her children, as her daughters also had issues with abusive men, alcoholism and drug addiction, and low self-esteem. With years of abuse throughout her childhood and as an adult, it is no surprise that her mental health has been negatively impacted.
Stephanie recognized that she was too dependent on people, including her ex-husband who she continued to care for, her children, and especially her grandchildren. The high level of dependency that she felt often left her in a position where she could not follow through with her plans to improve her situation or strive for greater happiness. Nonetheless, her dependency can be seen as an impact of a lifelong experience of abuse, which diminished her self-esteem and left her feeling as though she could not pursue other options.

The power and control that their male partners exerted within the women’s relationships extended to their lives outside of the home as well. Mikayla Calvert, a thirty-seven-year-old African American woman, was an unemployed recipient of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Despite the difficulty she had going into great detail about her abusive
marriage, she reported it as being filled with physical, emotional, and financial abuse. With
regards to the financial abuse she said, “He withholds resources making it so that I have to use
whatever resources [I can get] like credit cards. He was really happy for me to use my credit card
so that my credit got shot because of course he doesn't want to pay for things like that.”

Withholding resources so that she had to rely on credit cards is a form of financial abuse, in that
it sabotaged her credit and forced her to rely on him and other forms of assistance in order to
survive. Mikayla briefly described her life at the beginning of their relationship and how she
wanted to get away:

When I met him I was working full time, had a vehicle, I had everything… everything
was all set up. All he did was walk on in with his toothbrush, literally, and a backpack
and a cup. That was it. And, uh, I got laid off— the week— a few days before we got
married and he was working on campus because he was attending school and I would
work little odds and end jobs to get back into the work force and then I landed a full-time
job. I started a business in between. Then I landed a full-time job. Uh, [he] raped me. I
was pregnant. So I was trying to find another job that would be— I could support myself
and my daughter but move away.

Although her marriage lasted five years, she stated that she wanted to get out of the relationship
even before she got pregnant, but it took her two years before that happened.

While Mikayla was able to recognize early on that the relationship was not what she
wanted and knew she needed to find a way to get out it, she was constrained financially from
being able to do so, and ended up staying with him longer than she would have liked. When the
situation got worse and she began to truly fear for her and her daughter’s lives, she ran away and
returned to her mother’s home in Riverway, where she was attempting to start over and create
some stability in her life, though was suffering the ramifications of the financial abuse she
endured. Her victimization disrupted her life entirely, in that she was raped and had a child as a
result, and then had to leave everything she had out of fear that her husband would cause more
harm. As someone who did not discuss childhood abuse, her experience with intimate partner violence differs slightly from the patterns illustrated by other women in the sample. In particular, she expressed an early recognition of an unfavorable situation with her husband, which the majority of her counterparts did not. It is possible that the absence of childhood abuse is linked to the earlier recognition of signs of abuse, but nonetheless, she remained in an abusive marriage for five years until she was able to escape.

Sue Reed, a fifty-nine-year-old White woman whose stepfather was physically and verbally abusive throughout her adolescence, and was the reason why she left home as soon as she turned eighteen, described how he continued to exert control over her elderly mother by not allowing them to communicate: “If I leave a voicemail he deletes it…If I call up there, he hangs up on me. So, so, I can’t have any kind of relationship with Mom. I don’t know if she is dead or alive.” Though she did not understand why her mother stayed with him, Sue labeled her as a docile person and attributed their relationship lasting to the abuse-riddled past they had. In Sue’s own relationship history, she discussed her ex-husband’s efforts of control:

Q: So you were working full-time until you had your daughter?
Sue: Yeah. And then after that I went to school for the superintendent’s office. Was the assistant superintendent secretary. So I was doing that up until a month before I had her. And then he wanted me to stay home. My ex wanted me to stay home. So that’s what I did.

Despite the full-time job and steady income that Sue held, she had to quit because her ex-husband wanted her to stay home. Although she did not recognize his behavior as control or abuse, making her quit her job was a form of financial abuse, in that it left her in a position in which she had to depend on him financially. Despite her experience and recognition of her stepfather’s controlling behavior, she did not perceive any similarities within her own marriage.
Like many of the Riverway women who failed to notice signs of abuse, Sue lacked an awareness of being forced to quit her job as a form of financial control.

Similarly, Jill Carter, a sixty-one-year-old woman of Latino ethnicity who was no longer employed but volunteered at one of the local food banks, discussed how her ex-husband impacted her work:

He made me quit the railroad in ’82. [I] lost my retirement. Because he wanted me home more. [Working for the] railroad, you’re gone a lot of hours… And it cut into his time, and he didn’t like that. And I said well, you know, what do you want me to do, you know. I mean—he said well I want you to quit, and so I quit. And then I had my third child. And that was just devastating. I couldn’t—I wasn’t used to being home…I was miserable…I was very bitter because he made me quit.

Unlike Sue, Jill expressed the emotional toll quitting her job took on her. Along with losing her retirement fund, which would have provided her with some financial security later in life, she described being miserable and bitter about her husband making her quit a job she enjoyed. Although she found a job that gave her a schedule with regular hours nine months later, she had to abide by what her husband demanded and suffered the consequences of not being financially secure at this point in her life. Although Jill was not abused by her father as a child, her mother was controlling and caused Jill a considerable amount of emotional distress. Having a mother who controlled various aspects of her life and diminished her self-esteem likely taught Jill how to comply with her ex-husband’s demands. Her failure to recognize signs of financial control coupled with her efforts to appease him, resulted in the loss of financial stability and took a toll on her mental and emotional health.

Through the demands that their husbands put on them in making them quit the steady jobs they had, both Sue and Jill, and others like them, lost the income they were bringing in, and lost a part of themselves that they had worked hard for. Sue invested resources into her schooling...
to get the job in the superintendent’s office, only to be forced to quit to make her husband happy; Jill’s economic security, both at the time and for the future, was taken away due to her husband’s demands. Both women had controlling parental figures, whose behavior tended to negatively impact their ability to recognize signs of abuse from their romantic partners as adults. Additionally, both women attributed the end of the marriages as a result of their husband’s infidelity, and not the behavior associated with power and control in the relationship.

The mental and emotional toll that intimate partner abuse takes on a person typically lasts longer than the physical injuries. A diminished sense of self, oftentimes through the loss of employment and a sense of purpose, easily leaves one to be dependent on an abuser, both financially and emotionally, as the narratives presented demonstrate. The cycles of abuse and the effects that they had on the women shown here illustrate how the internalization of violent and/or controlling behavior negatively impacted the ability to recognize signs of abuse before the relationship got worse. Furthermore, abuse came to be an expected component of relationships that women were willing to tolerate, despite being unhappy. For some women, like Maria and Allison, it was often the case that relationships lasted until some other behavior surfaced, such as their partner’s infidelity or drug use. However, their tolerance of abuse was linked more to their failure to recognize the abuse as problematic, whereas they were able to consider infidelity or drug use as a deal-breaker to the relationship.

Given the examples of romantic relationships that they grew up with and the role models they had as children, tolerating abuse was not new or unexpected. Instead, the women often perceived their abusive relationships as ordinary, and attributed their failure to other unacceptable behaviors. In this way, the abuse was often downplayed; rather than describing the abuse and/or control that they endured at the hands of their partners as the breaking points of
their relationships, they needed some other reason to validate their dissatisfaction with their partners.

Interrupting the Cycle

About 92 percent (n=22) of the women in the sample had children, meaning that their own well-being was not the sole factor in the decision regarding whether to leave their abusers. In addition to partner’s problematic behavior, 58 percent (n=14) of the sample discussed their efforts and/or desires to leave their abusers so that their children would not be subjected to the violence, as well as trying to be better parents than their own. In this sense, children’s well-being was often a motivator for interrupting the cycle of violence. Estela Lopez was one of the many women who made explicit efforts not to subject her children to the same type of abuse she experienced as a child. When asked whether she was ever mean to them the way her father was she said, “No. Oh no, no, no, no. I have never slapped any of my sons or my daughter. Or even cuss at them or anything like that… Never, never, never, never. I’ve never whipped them.” The emphasis placed on having never done anything remotely close to how her father treated her illustrates the lasting, negative impact that it had on her, and the decision she made to never abuse them or personally subject them to the type of violent experiences she had as a child.

Oftentimes making the decision to leave an abuser meant giving up their sense of stability, whether through their employment, housing, or other financial security. In some cases, it seemed as though an awareness of the potentially detrimental effects of domestic violence did not occur until children were present and/or being directly impacted. However, as demonstrated above, the women knew they were not in healthy relationships, but needed a different reason to leave. For some women it was the discovery of their partner’s infidelity or drug use, while others thought of their children’s well-being. Some women also considered the indirect exposure to
abuse, such as children witnessing their abusive relationships and the issues associated with domestic violence, including police intervening or having their children taken away.

Lindsay Wilson, who discussed witnessing her parent’s abusive relationship, is a prime example of the intergenerational transmission of violence, and the desire to stop the cycle from continuing with her children. She made an effort to remain on good terms with her son’s father so that they could have a relationship, but it did not work out because of his abusive behavior:

I don't even want to speak to his dad because we just—we cannot get along…I don't want him to know where I live, nothing like that…when we were together he would hit me and stuff like that. There was a lot of domestic violence, but I'm not scared, I'm not like scared of him, but I don't want anything like that around the kids. Because they've been through enough that I put them through, just growing up and being young and getting into either fights, getting DUls, and just all sorts of just dumb drama stuff. So I'm trying to make it—make sure everything is normal now, whatever that is.

Lindsay’s narrative suggests an internalization of the violence that she had been exposed to throughout her life, as well as downplaying the effects of her abusive ex-boyfriend—by framing the abuse as drama and harassment, and her insistence of not fearing him—which speaks to a sense of normalization in intimate relationships. Although her children had already been exposed to a considerable amount of violence (and other adversity as a result of her own behavior), she expressed a desire to shield them from any further exposure, essentially attempting to stop the cycle.

At fifteen-years-old, Michelle Hilliard, now fifty, ran away from home to escape the abuse that her stepfather inflicted upon her and her mother. After enduring thirteen years of abuse from her stepfather, Michelle promised herself never to go through that again:

Michelle: I don’t have any intimacy issues or anything, you know, but I am very—I will never let a man yell at me or verbally abuse me, nothing. Nothing. I will not be a victim…It really made me independent. I will pay for everything—even if I am married to you I am going to pay for everything.
Q: So you wanted to avoid being like your mother?
Michelle: Yeah. Yeah.

She was well aware of the unhealthy relationship that her mother was in, and did not want to allow herself to follow her mother’s footsteps and suffer more abuse from men. However, things did not go as planned. After divorcing her first husband who was verbally and sexually abusive, she vowed to never allow her daughters to go through any abuse by one of her partners. In discussing her second marriage, she explained how she did not like that her husband yelled at her daughter and would always tell her daughters they needed to tell her if he ever hurt them.

[One time] I walked into the house and [my daughter] was reaching over the table and he stabbed her with a fork. Not hard I don’t think, because I—yeah, I freaked. I packed everything. I left the house I was helping pay for. Everything. I put the girl’s stuff in there and we were out of there.

While stabbing her daughter with a fork may not seem as extreme as some of the violent incidences described by other women, for Michelle, any amount of abuse was too much. Unlike her own mother, she took action to protect herself and her daughters from being victimized by her husband, so as to not have them relive her childhood experiences.

Mikayla Calvert, mentioned above, discussed returning to the Riverway area with her daughter, who was born as a result of marital rape, to escape her abusive husband. Although she had to move in with her mother, did not have a place to call her own, and had to rely on welfare, she preferred to find a job and work her way up to gaining stability again than to spend any more time with her abusive husband. In explaining the divorce she was going through, she expressed fear in the possibility of her husband gaining custody of their daughter, who she said he had also abused, though she did not go into detail about it. “All I can say is if anything happens to myself or the little girl— the judge is just as blood guilty as my spouse.” She went on to say, “I’m
looking out for the best interest of my child and my— my welfare— and also my husband’s. Because someone is going to wind up dead.” It was clear how much she feared him and the extent to which she perceived him as violent and capable of causing extreme harm to her and her daughter. The amount of abuse that she dealt with was not something that she wanted to continue to subject her daughter to. She went on to discuss her decision not to get involved with another man because of the potential threat of introducing more abuse into their lives.

I prefer to stay single because that’s how it works right now… Another reason is—my daughter is three. My husband has abused her. I would be a fool for me to bring some stranger to do the same thing to my daughter. To me that’d be crazy to introduce a possible predator. And I am not—I don’t have the best judgment. Apparently my picker is broken.

Mikayla’s experience in an abusive marriage was associated with her decision to opt out of dating in an effort to protect her daughter from further abuse. Not only does it show that she did not want to subject her daughter to more trauma, but also that she expected another man to be abusive. In this sense, she did not downplay the effects of the abuse she experienced, but rather it heightened her sense of protectiveness and contributed to her aversion to dating. Despite the financial constraint that she was experiencing, she would rather be on her own and find a way to provide for her daughter than to bring another man (i.e., potential predator) into their lives. Her daughter’s safety took precedence over the possibility of a partner who could contribute to her life, emotionally, socially, and financially. For Mikayla and others who chose to opt out of dating, avoiding abuse meant avoiding a relationship altogether.

Although many eventually left their abusive partners, it was not the case for all of the women in Riverway. Ethel Moore was one of the exceptions:

Ethel: Mother had enough to deal with herself without dealing with my problems. So I can see where she didn't nurture me. But I always blamed her for not leaving. And she
said she had several times. She'd put the boys in the wagon and start down the street, and she'd think, "Where will I go? We don't have welfare. We don't have family. So where would I go?" And she'd turn around and go back. So you know, all of these things lead to your life. It makes up who you are, I think.

Q: Right. Did you feel that way as well? That you have nowhere to go if you left? Ethel: Yeah. Well, I took it on myself. I blamed myself because I wasn't smart enough to know better, you know. So I took on the blame. But the biggest thing was, I wanted to protect my kids.

Just like her mother, Ethel felt she was unable to leave her abusive husband. While she referred to herself as not being smart enough to know better, she attributed her mother’s inability to leave to a lack of resources. However, she expressed her desire to protect her children as being the most important aspect. Whereas her mother did not nurture her or protect her from her father’s abuse, Ethel wanted to do better for her children. As mentioned in the introduction, she used the police to threaten her husband, which sufficed in shifting his abuse to herself instead of to her children; something that her mother did not do for Ethel and her siblings. In this sense, Ethel enacted agency in the best way she could, and tried to offer her children the protection and support that her own mother failed to provide. For women like Ethel who were unwilling or unable to give up on relationships, protecting their children often manifested in different ways, such as making themselves the sole recipient of the direct abuse. When staying in the relationship was the only option, so too was enduring the abuse.

As the narratives of the Riverway women have shown, the early exposure to abuse is pervasive and impacts the ways in which women are (un)able to protect themselves from further victimization. In most cases, the violent behavior was normalized, internalized, and downplayed, so much so that warning signs of potential abuse from a partner often went undetected. Sometimes, even when (physical) abuse was present within a relationship, women did not consider it enough of a reason to leave their partners. Instead they used other problematic behavior, such as infidelity or drug use, as the breaking point under which they then negotiated
what action to take. And, as this section demonstrated, oftentimes children were also motivators for the women to take action in interrupting the cycles of abuse.

These women did not want their children to have the same experiences they had as kids, and frequently used that as a reason to leave their abusers. The narratives presented suggest that the consequences of the abuse were heightened when the women saw the situation through the lens of their children, which allowed them to negotiate whether to stay or leave. The realization that their partner had harmed, or could harm, their children was a greater motive for leaving than their own victimization. Although not all of the children were abused, the reality is that children had been exposed to violence, albeit not always direct. As studies (e.g., Edelson, 1999; Cherlin et al., 2004) and 38 percent of the women in the present sample discussed, witnessing parent’s abusive relationships negatively impacts children and their understandings of intimate relationships. The exposure to violence at an early age tends to set the tone for how children will behave in their own relationships, wherein boys are more likely to externalize and imitate the behavior they have learned, while girls internalize and tolerate it. Witnessing the abusive relationships their mothers were involved in is enough to continue the cycle of violence, just as many of them witnessed their own mothers’ victimization.

However, the recognition that the women were living in hostile environments and subjecting their children to unhealthy relationships often provided women with the excuse, or source of strength, that they needed to interrupt the cycles of abuse. For some, this meant leaving their abusers, and for many, it meant avoiding relationships altogether. Even for women like Ethel Moore who did not leave their abusers, efforts to interrupt the cycle were made in different ways, wherein they protected their children from being direct victims of their partner’s abuse. In their case, taking on more abuse was a better option than having their kids suffer. As a whole, the
women expressed desires and demonstrated an enactment of agency to do better for their children, most often when their own mothers failed to take action in stopping the abuse from (step)fathers.

Despite the efforts made at protecting their children from abuse, for the majority of the mothers in the sample, children were ultimately exposed to a violent home environment. While it remains to be seen whether the exposure that the children had to their mother’s abuse will lead them down the same path into abusive relationships as adults, the patterns elucidate the ways in which these cycles of victimization are reproduced in families.
CONCLUSION

As the narratives of the twenty-four Riverway women have shown, navigating through an abusive relationship is complex. The prevalence of violence that exists throughout the life course is pervasive and difficult to escape. Early childhood exposure to violence, either through direct physical or sexual abuse, or indirectly witnessing parents’ violent altercations, essentially normalized interpersonal violence. The hostile home environments in which the women lived often led them to find escape routes, namely marriage. Marrying young in order to get away from one’s father (or other abusive adult figure) tended to result in the women entering their first abusive relationship. The examples of intimate relationships that the women grew up with, which were often filled with violence, likely socialized the women to understand abuse as a normal and expected component of adult intimate unions. Along with the internalization of the violence they were exposed to, the need to escape and find immediate protection tended to be associated with an inhibited ability to recognize warning signs of further victimization.

For most of the women, the first violent relationship was not their last, rather it was the onset of a sequence of intimate partner abuse. The abuse endured as adults often left the women with lasting physical and mental health deficits, although most downplayed the effects of the violence. The intimate partner abuse they experienced also caused disruptions in the women’s employment and housing situations, placing them in further disadvantaged positions. Leaving the homes and jobs they had to escape an abuser typically meant that they had to find another place to live and start the job search all over. Due to the lack of jobs in the Riverway region, getting back on their feet often took some time and ensued a period of financial difficulty and insecurity, which some never truly recovered from and were left to rely on various forms of government assistance. However, facing intense financial constraints was not enough to keep them in an
abusive relationship, especially when other forms of unacceptable behavior were discovered, such as drug use or infidelity.

Women with children also had an additional motive for negotiating their position in abusive relationships and making an effort to interrupt the cycle of violence they were in. While most left their abusive partners for the sake of protecting their children, others did not. Those who stayed nonetheless took efforts to protect their children from direct abuse and attempted to shift the violence away from their children and unto themselves. However, despite the action taken by the women to interrupt the cycles and protect their children, those children were still exposed to the abuse. The exposure to indirect violence, essentially reproduced the violence and potentially marked the beginning of their own cycles of victimization (and perhaps for sons, perpetration).

While the findings from these data are consistent with the intergenerational transmission of violence, this is only one possible interpretation. The in-depth examination of the personal accounts of the twenty-four Riverway women illustrate the complexity of a social problem in a manner that previous studies have not done. Although the small sample size is a limitation in that generalizability is not possible, the fact that a pattern that has not been extensively studied within the existing literature emerged, points to the need for further investigation on the topic. These findings call for a longitudinal study that can track the intergenerational transmission of violence within families, to examine whether the children of abused women do in fact continue the cycle into their adult lives. While a continuation of this study may not be feasible, future research should attempt to interview more than one generation of a family with a history of violence to delve deeper into the underlying mechanisms within the cycle of violence. Speaking to children, in particular, can elucidate some of the ways that they have come to understand interpersonal
violence. If we can better comprehend their perspectives, we can take steps to educate them about warning signs of abuse so that they are better able to recognize the behavior as unhealthy, rather than as normal parts of intimate relationships. This can perhaps disrupt the reproduction of the cycle of violence.

Furthermore, given that there were only a limited number of women who did not fit the cyclical patterns, more data should be collected on women who did not experience childhood abuse but were involved in abusive adult relationships. This would allow for a comparison to delve deeper into the differences in the ways in which violence is learned and understood, as well as the agency that women enact in negotiating their situations. The lack of data did not allow for a comparison within this sample, but future research can attempt to provide an alternate interpretation of the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Also, due to the fact that the original research project was not intended to investigate the cycle of violence but rather the experiences of a low-income population, participants may not have anticipated discussing any abuse that they had experienced and consequently did not want to share that part of their life story. Even among those who did mention abuse in their lives, some refused to discuss certain aspects of the violent past or did not go into great detail, so it is possible that others purposely chose not to give any indication of abuse. However, the fact that this pattern emerged speaks to the prevalence of violence and abuse within families.

Although studies tend to attribute women’s reluctance to distance themselves from their abusers to their financial and instrumental dependence (e.g., Scott et al., 2002; Purvin, 2007), the emotional attachment is often something that pulls them back, yet is rarely considered. Perhaps because of the difficulty in measuring a concept such as love, studies have not adequately accounted for the emotional connections that exist between couples when domestic violence is
the focus of the investigation. While this analysis was unable to get a better understanding of the conception of emotional attachment and the nuanced love-hate dynamics that exist within abusive relationships, there were instances in which the women expressed feelings of guilt or missing their partners, despite the presence of abuse. Unfortunately, not enough information was provided to be able to analyze it further. Future in-depth research should be done to attempt to understand what other factors, aside from economic and instrumental support, influence a woman’s decision to stay with an abusive partner and how they conceive of their relationships. One idea is that the women want the abuse to stop, but not for their marriage to end. It could be that they are accustomed to tolerating abuse, due to the lifelong exposure they have had, and believe that the situation can get better.

The findings from this study are similar to the limited existing research regarding the cycle of victimization and tolerance of intimate partner abuse, but expands upon it with the use of a non-purposive sample of victims of domestic violence. Due to the fact that the experiences of the abused women came about in discussions that were not focused on uncovering instances of violence further contributes to what we know about family violence and intimate partner victimization. The participants for this study were chosen because of their status as low-income residents who were willing to share some of their experiences as they relate to living in the Riverway region. The pattern of intergenerational violence emerged from the data, and points to the fact that not all victims of domestic abuse seek assistance, and many live their lives without going to shelters to escape their abusers. It is not to say that their experiences are inherently distinct from victims who do utilize the available services, but rather that we need to expand upon sampling strategies to extend our knowledge of how women experience abuse and the influence that early exposure to violent relationships may have on the likelihood of future
victimization. This, in effect, will enable us to better understand the nuance that exists among victims of domestic violence who do not seek support services, especially those with a long history of victimization, and enhance the ability to provide resources that women need to achieve and maintain safety.

As a whole, the narratives in this study have provided insight as to how women in cycles of victimization navigate their intimate relationships, rather than solely why abuse occurs. In many ways, the internalization and normalization of violent behaviors are coping mechanisms that girls learn early in life, and can set the tone for their future interpersonal relationships. Downplaying the effects of abuse consequently impacts the ability to recognize signs of non-physical abuse, especially financial power and control, and is associated with the likelihood that women will find themselves in physically abusive relationships. With more research, hopefully public perception of intimate partner violence can shift from the negative victim-blaming rhetoric towards one that recognizes the social and structural constraints that complicate the enactment of women’s agency.
REFERENCES


