

Frequency and Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies to Survive Abuse Employed by Battered Mexican-Origin Women

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This study documented the frequency and perceived effectiveness of battered Mexican-origin women's usage of formal and informal help and personal strategies to survive abuse. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 75 battered Mexican-origin women. Consistent with survivor theory, results indicated that participants sought help multiple times from several formal and informal help sources; some (i.e., shelter, family) were perceived more effective than others (i.e., lawyer, in-laws). Participants engaged in various personal strategies to survive abuse; some (i.e., using faith/religion) were rated more effective than others (i.e., placating the batterer). Responses to open-ended questions suggest why specific help sources and strategies were/were not effective and provide socioculturally specific suggestions for improving services. This study illuminates battered Mexican-origin women's strengths and barriers that impede their survival efforts. Contributions include focusing on a subset of battered Latinas and documenting the frequency and perceived effectiveness of a wide array of help sources and strategies.

Keywords: *domestic violence; Mexican-origin women; strategies to survive abuse*

Domestic violence is a significant problem within the Latino (Caetano, Shafer, Clark, Cunradi, & Raspeberry, 2000; Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana, 2004; Texas Council on Family Violence, 2003) and Mexican-origin communities (Aldorando, Kaufman Kantor, & Jasinski, 2002; Lown & Vega, 2001). From a survivor theory perspective, battered women are expected to respond to the threat and occurrence of violence by actively and continuously seeking help to protect themselves (and, if mothers, their children) in a

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myriad of creative ways (Browne, 1998; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). Previous research indicates that battered women access formal and informal resources to leave the abusive situation and employ survival strategies while they are still living in the abusive situation (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt, & Cook, 2003). For many battered Latinas, issues such as language, culture, social isolation, limited information and education, low finances, unfamiliarity with U.S. culture and legal system, and immigration status complicate efforts to seek help and to leave abusive relationships (Orloff & Little, 1999). Compared to their European American counterparts, battered Latinas in general (Bonilla-Santiago, 1996; Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000), and Mexican-origin women in particular (Torres, 1991; West, 1998), tend to be less likely to seek help or to leave the abusive relationship. However, heretofore there has been insufficient empirical research that explores how battered Mexican-origin women *do* act to survive abuse and how effective their efforts are perceived to be. The present study, therefore, sought to address this gap in the literature and explored the diverse efforts that Mexican-origin women employ to survive abuse and the frequency and perceived effectiveness of these strategies. Specifically, battered Mexican-origin women's efforts to seek formal and informal help as well as their usage of personal strategies (e.g., placating the batterer) were explored through collecting descriptive quantitative and qualitative information.

Review of the Literature

Defining Abuse

Dutton (1994) defines partner abuse as a pattern of interactions in which one intimate partner is forced to change his or her behavior in response to the threats or actions of the other partner. In agreement with those who argue for utilizing a broad definition of abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2001; Walker, 1979), this study defined partner abuse as inclusive of physical, sexual, and/or psychological forms of abuse. Battered Mexican-origin women are frequently susceptible to additional forms of psychological abuse that include using immigrant status (e.g., refusing to file papers, threatening deportation or taking children); culture (e.g., accusing her of abandoning her culture); economics (e.g., forcing her to work illegally, preventing her from working); and language (e.g., preventing her from learning English) as points of exploitation (Orloff & Little, 1999).

Prevalence

Several studies have documented the severity of partner abuse specifically within the Latino population (Aldorando et al., 2002; Caetano et al., 2000; Cunradi, et al., 2002;

Lown & Vega, 2001; Murdaugh et al., 2004). Aguilar Hass, Dutton, and Orloff (2000) found that 49.3% of the immigrant Latina women they surveyed reported having experienced physical abuse, and 60% of the women reported experiencing psychological abuse in the form of dominance and isolation. Similarly, the National Women's Law Center (2000) estimated the national domestic violence prevalence rate for Latinos to be 54.9%. The Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV; 2003) surveyed Latinos living in Texas and found that 77% of all Latino Texans (compared to 74% of general population) reported that they, a family member, and/or a friend or coworker had experienced some form of intimate partner violence in his or her lifetime. However, findings of significantly higher risk of wife assault among Latino families are eliminated after accounting for the effects of structural variables, i.e., family income, age, and economic stressors (Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo, 1994; Neff, Holamon, & Schulter, 1995; Straus & Smith, 1990).

Therefore, although rates of partner abuse are consistent across racial and ethnic lines, there is evidence that different groups of battered women respond to abuse differently. Latinas in general (Bonilla-Santiago, 1996; Gondolf, Fisher, & McFerron, 1988), and Mexican-origin women in particular (Torres, 1991), tend to stay in abusive marriages longer, to return to the abusive marriage more frequently, and to name fewer incidents as abusive than their non-Latina White counterparts. Evidence also suggests that Latinas are least likely, when compared with other racial or ethnic groups of battered women, to seek help in the form of medical (Krishnan, Hilbert, & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Rodriguez, Craig, Mooney, & Bauer, 1998), legal (Krishnan et al., 2001), and/or social services (Dutton et al., 2000; Torres, 1991).

Help-Seeking and the Survivor Perspective

Given the many adverse physical and psychological effects of intimate partner abuse, a common question asked of battered women is, "Why don't you just leave?" (Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). However, Mahoney (1994) presented an important critique of the focus on the "staying versus leaving" dichotomy, arguing that it was erroneous to equate "staying" with victimization, and "leaving" with agency: "The question, 'why didn't you leave?' . . . tends to hide all the things that women actually do to cope with violence and to resist the batterer's quest for control" (Mahoney, 1994, p. 76). Women who stay with their abusers may still be agentic, in that they are actively responding to abuse, resisting control, and protecting themselves and their children.

From Mahoney's perspective, researchers and advocates ought to focus not on whether battered women do or do not leave abusive relationships, but instead on their continuing, active efforts to respond to the situation to ensure safety. Some researchers (Browne, 1998; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Lempert, 1996) have adopted this survivor theory perspective. From this view, battered women increase their help-seeking in response to the severity and nature of the threat and violence and in proportion to the

extent and kind of support they receive (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). Survivor theory allows for acknowledgment of the many ways women act to survive abuse, including seeking formal and informal help in an effort to leave the relationship, and employing personal strategies, to cope while still living in the relationship. The research reported here adopts a survivor theory perspective.

Formal Help-Seeking

Wauchope (1988), using data from the National Family Violence Re-survey (Straus & Gelles, 1990), reported that two thirds (68%) of the women in the national sample who had experienced severe violence had sought help at least once. Various studies have documented non-Latina battered women's usage of shelters, medical services, social services, police, legal agents, and therapists (Bowker, 1983; Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005; Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). Accessing services appears to be an important factor in battered women's ability to leave an abusive relationship. Horton and Johnson (1993) found that 96% of the battered women who successfully and safely left their abusive situation had discussed the abuse with someone or some agency.

Some research has documented formal help-seeking efforts of battered Latinas and identified barriers to these attempts (Dutton et al., 2000; Murdaugh et al., 2004; West, Kaufman Kantor, & Jasinski, 1998). West et al. (1998), using data from the 1994 National Alcohol and Family Violence Survey, found that slightly less than half of the battered Latinas surveyed (compared to two thirds of European American women) had sought outside help. This study identified that being young and not speaking English were associated with less help-seeking (West et al., 1998). Additional barriers to formal help-seeking for battered Latinas appear to be lack of money, fear of losing children, language issues, and lack of transportation (Dutton et al., 2000; Murdaugh et al., 2004).

Informal Help-Seeking

Battered women may also turn to informal sources of help in their attempts to survive partner abuse (Fugate et al., 2005). Fugate et al. (2005), using data from the Chicago Women's Health Risk Study, found that 71% of the battered women surveyed had talked to friends or family about the violence in their relationships. Two studies have found that battered Latinas are more likely to seek informal, as opposed to formal help (Dutton et al., 2000; West et al., 1998).

Personal Strategies to Survive Abuse

Empirical (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Goodman et al., 2003) and qualitative (Lempert, 1996) studies conducted with non-Latinas have demonstrated that strategies to survive

within the relationship can be viewed as evidence of the women's resistance and agency. Davies and Lyon (1998) described women's "protection strategies," including fleeing, self-defense, or trying to get the batterer to change (e.g., through counseling); they also described "staying strategies," for example, placating the batterer or carefully preserving one's support system. Similarly, Goodman et al. (2003) built on previous research to suggest and empirically test the categories of "safety planning," such as hiding the car or house keys or working out an escape plan; "resistance," fighting back or leaving home; and "placating," avoiding him or trying to keep things quiet for him. To the authors' knowledge, no study has yet identified Mexican-origin women's use of personal strategies to survive abuse.

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies utilized by battered women of Mexican origin to survive intimate partner abuse. Because the study was exploratory, no specific hypotheses were proposed. The main goal was to explore the type and frequency of formal and informal help-seeking, and personal strategies to survive abuse utilized by this particular subset of Latinas. This study made the following important contributions to the existing literature: First, it focused on a particular subset of battered Latinas, those of Mexican-origin. Second, this study drew on a survivor perspective to gather information regarding the diverse forms of help-seeking employed by Mexican-origin battered women. Third, this study collected both quantitative and qualitative information.

Method

Participants and Procedure

In all, 75 women, who met the following criteria, participated in the study: They were age 18 years or older, of Mexican ethnicity (born in Mexico or born outside of Mexico but with Mexican ancestors), and had past or present involvement in a heterosexual intimate partner relationship that included some form of physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse (see Table 1 for a summary of demographic and relationship data).

Participants were recruited from six agencies in Southern Central Texas. These agencies included a battered women's shelter, a counseling center for immigrants and refugees, a social services organization for immigrants, a nonprofit legal project for immigrants and refugees, a police department victims' services program, and a transitional housing center for women. Methods for recruitment included staff referrals, flyers, presentations to groups (e.g., support groups, educational groups), and snowball sampling (e.g., obtaining referrals from initial participants). All participants received a cover letter, available in English or Spanish, explaining the purpose of the study. They were provided with appropriate local referral numbers for domestic violence hotlines and counseling services, in the case that participation in the

Table 1
Demographic Information on 75 Battered Mexican-Origin Women Participating in Study

Age	Range (18-67 years), $M = 32.33$, $SD = 8.17$
Birth country	68% Mexico, 32% United States
Years in the United States	Range (1-55 years), $M = 15.19$, $SD = 12.76$
Monthly income	Range (US\$0-US\$1,800), $M = US\$335.36$, $SD = US\$498.94$
Years attended school	Range (1-20 years), $M = 9.43$, $SD = 4.15$
English ability	39% Fluent, 36% Some, 25% None
Immigrant status	63% Undocumented, 37% Documented
Religion	68% Catholic, 27% Protestant, 7% Other
Family of origin abuse	49% Yes, 51% No
Marital Status	45% Separated, 25% Single, 8% Married, 11% Divorced, 1% Widowed
Years in relationship	Range (0.17-20 years), $M = 6.13$, $SD = 4.49$
Currently living with partner	96% No, 4% Yes
Years apart from partner	Range (0-6 years), $M = 0.87$, $SD = 1.26$
Number of children living with participant	Range (0-5 children), $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.34$

Note: Participants were instructed to think about their most recent abusive relationship when responding to questions.

study caused psychological distress. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and were reminded that participation in the study was voluntary. Participants gave oral, rather than written consent, to make certain their identities were kept anonymous. Each participant was asked, via a semistructured interview, to provide demographic information, to report on their help-seeking from formal and informal sources, and to identify the personal strategies that they used to survive abuse on a daily basis. Participants rated how often they sought different types of help and how effective they found each of these to be in terms of assisting them in surviving the abuse. Participants were given \$10 for participation in this study. Mean time for completion of the interview was 40 minutes.

Measures

A review of the literature revealed that few instruments have been developed to measure battered women's formal and informal help-seeking. Moreover, psychometric properties of these instruments (Effectiveness of Obtaining Resources, EOR, Sullivan, Tan, Basta, Rumptz, & Davidson, 1992; Types and Perceived Effectiveness of Coping Strategies, Yoshihama, 2002) indicated inadequate internal consistency. Due to the dearth of adequate instruments, a questionnaire was developed for this research. The questionnaire was adapted from materials used in previous studies (Dutton et al., 2000; McFarlane, Soeken, & Wiist, 2000; Yoshihama, 2002) and the

primary investigator's clinical experience with battered Mexican-origin women. Participants were given the following instructions before completing the measure: "I am interested in the various ways that you sought help to avoid, end, or escape the abuse in your relationship. There are no right or wrong answers. For the following questions, please think about the last 6 months of your most recent relationship in which there was some form of emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse." The questionnaire was translated into Spanish by the principal investigator (PI) and back-translated by a Mexican-origin Spanish speaker until accurate translation was obtained.

Formal Help-Seeking

To assess formal help-seeking, participants were administered a series of questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale response format inquiring into their usage of different sources of formal help. These services included medical services, lawyer, shelter, women's program, police, social worker, and counselor. Participants were asked to indicate whether they sought the type of help, how often, and how helpful they perceived the help to be. Responses to frequency spanned from *never* to *very often*. Responses to helpfulness of the formal help source ranged from *not at all* to *extremely helpful*. Higher scores reflect more frequent usage and greater perceived helpfulness of help obtained (see appendix for measures used).

Informal Help-Seeking

To measure participants' informal help-seeking, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their help-seeking from the following informal help sources: immediate family, extended family, partner's family, friends, religious officials, and coworkers. Similar to the questions regarding formal help-seeking, women were asked to indicate, on a 5-point Likert-type scale, how often they sought help from each of these people and how helpful the assistance was that they received.

Personal Strategies to Survive Abuse

To assess participants' usage of personal strategies to survive abuse, a 16-item questionnaire was developed based on previous research (Bowker, 1983; Davies & Lyons, 1998), the PI's practice experience with battered Mexican-origin women, and interviews conducted by the PI with service providers who work with the population of interest. An example of a personal strategy is "walking away from a threatening situation." Following the format for assessing formal and informal help-seeking, participants were asked whether they engaged in the behaviors, the frequency with which they engaged in these behaviors, and how helpful they perceived these behaviors to be

in surviving the abuse. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores correspond to more frequent usage of the behavior and more perceived helpfulness of the strategy.

Open-Ended Questions

Participants were asked four open-ended questions regarding the concerns they had about seeking outside help, the barriers to help-seeking they perceived, the strategies that proved most successful in terms of surviving the abuse, and suggestions for improving services for battered women of Mexican-origin.

Results and Discussion

Usage of Formal Services

Consistent with previous research (Bowker, 1983; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988), the battered women in this study reported accessing a number of services and agencies. Eighty percent of participants ($N = 60$) accessed formal sources of help, on average 3 to 4 times during the last 6 months of their most recent abusive relationship. Participants rated these services, on average, to be *moderately to very helpful* ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.58$). See Table 2 for a summary of formal help-seeking results.

The formal service accessed by the largest percentage of participants (64%) was the domestic violence shelter. Although this finding may have been associated with the study's recruitment procedures, participants reported using shelters 1 to 2 times during the last 6 months of their most recent abusive relationship. Participants who used shelters rated them to be *very* and *extremely helpful*. Many described shelters as places where they finally felt safe; one participant explained, "The shelter is very helpful because I can sleep at night finally, and my son can sleep at night." Consistent with previous research conducted with non-Latina battered women (Davis & Srinivasan, 1995), shelters were described as places where participants were connected to other agencies, such as housing, childcare, and legal services.

After shelters, police were used by the second greatest percentage of participants (48%), on average 2 to 3 times. Police were rated to be *moderately helpful* by those who accessed them. Many women described how the police intervened, arrested the batterer, afforded temporary safety, and provided them with information about other services, e.g., domestic violence shelters. Moreover, calling the police was experienced as empowering for a few women: "I pressed charges and that was freeing. I didn't want him to do this [abuse] to any other women. I said, this stops right here."

Counselors were accessed by 28% of the participants on average 4 to 5 times and were rated to be *moderately to very helpful* by those participants: "I needed someone I could trust and who had a heart to listen." One participant described in her

Table 2
Usage and Perceived Helpfulness of Formal Help Sources Used by Mexican-Origin Women Who Experienced Abuse From a Heterosexual Partner

Source of help	Participants Never Using Service		Participants Using Service at Least Once					
	n	%	n	%	Usage Frequency		Perceived Helpfulness ^a	
					M	SD	M	SD
Domestic violence shelter	27	36	48	64	2.08	0.35	4.44	1.13
Police	39	52	36	48	2.44	0.81	3.22	1.64
Counselor	54	72	21	28	3.57	1.43	3.90	1.30
Medical assistance	60	80	15	20	2.53	1.13	4.00	1.30
Lawyer	60	80	15	20	2.45	1.06	2.87	1.85
Social worker	63	84	12	16	3.08	1.31	3.33	1.37
Women's program	69	92	6	8	3.83	1.17	3.17	1.83

a. Scale ranged from 1 (*not at all helpful*) to 5 (*extremely helpful*). On the 5-point Likert-type scale assessing perceived helpfulness of formal help, a rating of 1 conceptually corresponds to *not at all helpful*; 2 corresponds to *somewhat helpful*, 3 corresponds to *moderately helpful*, 4 corresponds to *very helpful*, and 5 corresponds to *extremely helpful*.

interview how severe depression, resulting from her partner's abuse, left her hopeless, underweight, and unable to perform daily tasks, such as attending to personal hygiene; with the help of a counselor, she again found the motivation, hope, and stamina to engage in life.

Equal proportions of participants (20%) reported using legal and medical services. Medical services were used on average 2 to 3 times and were generally found to be *very helpful* by those who accessed them, although a few women responding to open-ended questions complained about medical professionals' insensitivity to domestic violence: "When I went to the doctor's office, they saw my bruises and no one asked me what had happened. They turned their backs." Legal services, which were used 2 to 3 times by participants who sought legal help, received the lowest rating of helpfulness. Many women described frustration with the legal system, particularly regarding their efforts to obtain protective orders. Participants were least likely to seek help from social workers (16%) and women's programs (8%), although those who did found these services to be *moderately* to *very helpful*.

Responses to open-ended questions provide a number of suggestions for improving formal services. Suggestions for shelters included no exit dates; longer stays; provision of shelter for women who have no marks of physical abuse; greater confidentiality, privacy, and space; more hotlines; and provision of alternative shelter, e.g., a hotel, in the absence of shelter space. Suggestions for police included offering

women information regarding shelters, providing safe and anonymous places for refuge; arresting the abuser and not the victim; giving abusers more serious punishments to deter re-offense; and stricter enforcement of protective orders. One participant, commenting on the way she perceived the current systemic response to domestic violence to be geared toward the woman, remarked, “Compared to the damage a woman goes through, they [abusers] get nothing! We need to change the laws. Violence should be punished, not slapped with a misdemeanor.” Another woman reminded, “Target him, not me. . . . Change him.”

Various participants voiced the need for increased counseling opportunities aimed at decreasing fear and isolation, increasing self-esteem, and providing parenting help, particularly regarding how to explain domestic violence to their children. The need for group counseling was voiced by many participants. Notably, only half the number of women reported using counseling, as compared to those who accessed a shelter. Lack of freedom of movement and limited financial resources were cited as barriers to seeking counseling. In addition, even when women have decided to leave an abusive relationship, they may still struggle to overcome the oppressive state of mind (low self-esteem, shame, isolation) created under abuse. Finally, women may be unaware of what counseling has to offer. Connecting women at shelters to on-site counselors may be vital to laying the groundwork for future mental health service help-seeking. More education and outreach regarding the role and benefits of counseling are important. Also, placing counselors within other social service agencies (e.g., Women, Infants, and Children [WIC] food stamps), physicians’ offices, and other locations where women may access them without the abusive partner’s knowledge, might help increase seeking help from this source.

The majority of Mexican-origin participants in this study (80%) reported they had accessed at least one source of formal help in the last 6 months of their most recent abusive relationship. Given that participants were recruited from agencies, this finding is not surprising; *what is notable* is that 77% of the sample reported accessing more than one formal help source. Indeed, the women who accessed formal services did so, on average, 3 to 4 times during the last 6 months of their most recent abusive relationship. This finding contradicts the popular stereotype of “backward, submissive” battered Latinas and immigrant women (Das Dasgupta, 1998). Services were perceived by participants to be *moderately to very helpful* in surviving abuse. Although previous research not specific to Mexican-origin women has found accessing formal services to be an important factor in battered women’s ability to leave an abusive situation (Horton & Johnson, 1993), this study’s findings indicate that these services are important *specifically* for Mexican-origin women as well. Hence, social service providers and policy makers must make an increased effort to make formal services more available and accessible for Mexican-origin battered women; the participants in this study provide suggestions for how this might be accomplished. Clinicians and advocates can be instrumental in helping to connect survivors to these services.

Table 3
Usage and Perceived Helpfulness of Sources of Informal Help
Used by Mexican-Origin Women Who Experienced Abuse From
a Heterosexual Partner

	Participants		Participants Using Source at Least Once							
	Never Using Source						Usage Frequency		Perceived Helpfulness ^a	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Source of help										
Immediate family	34	45	41	55	3.98	1.29	3.49	1.45		
Friends	35	47	40	53	4.48	1.06	3.95	1.30		
Partner's family	52	69	23	31	3.26	1.32	2.22	1.31		
Extended family	61	81	14	19	3.79	1.31	3.43	1.34		
Religions official	63	84	12	16	3.08	1.31	3.42	1.51		
Coworkers	64	85	11	15	3.45	1.51	4.00	1.34		

a. Scale ranged from 1 (*not at all helpful*) to 5 (*extremely helpful*). On the 5-point Likert-type scale assessing perceived helpfulness of informal help, a rating of 1 conceptually corresponds to *not at all helpful*; 2 corresponds to *somewhat helpful*, 3 corresponds to *moderately helpful*, 4 corresponds to *very helpful*, and 5 corresponds to *extremely helpful*.

Usage of Informal Sources of Help

Consistent with previous research (Dutton et al., 2000), a slightly larger percentage (83%, $N = 63$) of participants in this study reported accessing informal sources of help, compared to formal sources. Those who accessed informal sources tended to do so with greater frequency than those who accessed formal sources (on average, 4-5 times). In accord with previous research (Bowker, 1983), participants who sought informal help perceived these sources to be *moderately to very helpful* ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.32$). See Table 3 for a summary of informal help-seeking results.

The largest percentage of participants (55%) who sought informal help reported seeking help from immediate family, on average 4 to 5 times, and receiving *moderately to very helpful* responses. Participants described steadfast family members who helped them hide, offered support, intervened, and encouraged them to seek help and to leave the abuser. Several women, however, described barriers that made it difficult to seek help from family members. These included a desire to protect the family, abuse being normalized within their family of origin, and cultural values mandating that secrets stay within the family and/or that a good woman suffers: "My family wasn't going to help me; they told me that a woman must tolerate and take everything her husband does." Despite these barriers, family members were frequently sources of effective help for participants. Only 19% of participants sought help from extended family members (4-5 times); this help was deemed by these participants to

be *moderately* to *very helpful*. Many immigrant women indicated that they would have sought help from extended family had that been a possibility: "I wanted to turn to my family, but they were all in Mexico."

Friends were sources of help for the next largest percentage of participants (53%). Friends were sought out 4 to 5 times on average and were deemed *moderately* to *very helpful* by participants seeking their help. Participants recalled friends who listened, paid for hotels, offered food, bought their children gifts, and refused to let them return to abusers. Yet, although the majority of participants found friends to be helpful, issues of blaming the victim, turning backs, isolation, and shame interfered with many women's ability to seek help from friends.

Thirty-one percent of participants sought help from the abuser's family (3-4 times), but deemed this help to generally be only *somewhat helpful*. Several participants described abusers' family members as threatening (particularly with taking women's children), controlling, and generally unresponsive. For immigrant women without family in the United States, partners' families may have been the sole avenues for familial help-seeking; however, few of these experiences were considered as helpful.

Religious officials were sought out by 16% of participants (3-4 times). Participants deemed religious officials to be *moderately* to *very helpful*. This finding contradicts research conducted with non-Latina battered women (Horton & Johnson, 1993) and may reflect the importance of Catholicism and religion in the Mexican culture (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Sixty-eight percent of the participants reported being Catholic, 27% Protestant, and 7% identified their religion as Other. Many participants described their priests or pastors as extremely helpful in listening, counseling, and connecting them to other services. At least one participant, however, had a different experience with her religious leader: "I went to my priest, and he told me I had to take it, stay with him [abuser] because that's what a wife does. . . . He said I was just looking for problems."

Participants were least likely to seek help from coworkers (15%), but those who did so reported the help they received to be *very helpful*. This small percentage likely reflects the sample, i.e., over half the participants did not work and those who did were likely to be employed in solitary jobs, such as cleaning houses and babysitting.

A similar percentage (83%) of participants reported accessing informal sources of help as those accessing formal sources (80%). Informal help sources were important factors in these Mexican-origin women's efforts to survive abuse and women actively sought their help. From previous research, we know that battered women seek help from people such as family members (Van Hook, 2000), friends (Rose & Campbell, 2000), and clergy (Bowker & Maurer, 1986). We also have evidence that some informal help sources (e.g., friends) are more effective than others (e.g., clergy; Horton & Johnson, 1993). What has been unclear is whether these patterns pertain to battered Mexican-origin women as well and how effective the help is perceived to be. The current research indicates that, in addition to seeking formal help,

battered Mexican-origin women seek help from people they know, particularly from family members and friends.

Although patterns of informal help-seeking reported in studies conducted with non-Latinas were largely evident with this particular sample, some differences were apparent. For example, unlike results of studies conducted with non-Latina samples, clergy are perceived as effective by Mexican-origin women, perhaps because of the importance of the Catholic faith for this population. In addition, the likelihood that immigrant women's extended family members reside in Mexico may contribute to less frequent help-seeking from this particular informal source. The high rates of unemployment may help explain the low percentage of women seeking help from coworkers. These data indicate that perhaps friends, relatives, and familiar others are appropriate intervention points for advocates, counselors, and social service providers. Friends and family may feel concerned, but also overwhelmed and uncertain how to help. Groups and informational meetings that teach how one can support a woman experiencing domestic violence may be helpful in providing well-meaning friends and family with concrete ways to help, and thereby further increase informal help-seeking. Also, presenting information in a cultural context that demonstrates that Mexican-origin women tolerating abuse *does not* reflect the true spirit of cultural scripts of *marianismo* and *machismo*, and highlighting the strengths of Mexican and Mexican American culture, would lend more credibility and effectiveness to advocates and professionals seeking to prevent partner abuse within this community.

Usage of Personal Strategies to Survive Abuse

Personal strategies reported in the current study can be grouped into five categories that partially coincide with previous researchers' findings (Davies & Lyons, 1998): avoiding strategies, defensive strategies, spiritual or psychological strategies, social or familial strategies, and escaping strategies. These are possible groupings of the strategies, but they were not formally analyzed as subscales. Although previous researchers' similar groupings of personal strategies guided the design of the questionnaire items, these five categories also emerged from participants' responses to open-ended questions. Participants reported engaging in a number of strategies to survive abuse during the last 6 months of their most recent abusive relationship. One participant remarked, "I didn't realize how out of the ordinary all these things I was doing were . . . hiding, disguising myself, pretending all the time . . . for me it was normal." See Table 4 for a summary of personal strategies to survive abuse used by more than 50% of participants.

Avoiding Strategies

Avoiding strategies included endorsement of the following questionnaire items: placating the batterer, walking away from threatening situations, trying to talk the

Table 4
Usage and Perceived Helpfulness of Personal Strategies to Survive Abuse
Used by Mexican-Origin Women Who Experienced Abuse From
a Heterosexual Partner

	Participants Never Using Strategy		Participants Using Strategy at Least Once					
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal strategy								
Placate	9	12	66	88	4.47	1.01	2.22	1.36
Walk away	14	19	61	81	4.18	1.14	1.98	1.28
Talk him out of abuse	14	19	61	81	4.46	1.03	1.88	1.18
Maintain relationship with God	22	29	53	71	4.55	0.87	4.31	1.16
Protect body	24	32	51	68	4.04	1.18	2.38	1.41
Encourage his counseling	25	33	50	67	3.48	1.37	1.35	0.89
Move to undisclosed location	28	37	47	63	2.49	1.06	4.25	1.38
Fight back	29	39	46	61	3.67	1.33	1.82	1.27
Maintain relationships	37	49	38	51	4.55	0.89	4.08	1.21
Lock self in a room	37	49	38	51	3.47	1.18	1.83	1.15

a. Scale ranged from 1 (*not at all helpful*) to 5 (*extremely helpful*). On the 5-point Likert-type scale assessing perceived helpfulness of personal strategies, a rating of 1 conceptually corresponds to *not at all helpful*; 2 corresponds to *somewhat helpful*, 3 corresponds to *moderately helpful*, 4 corresponds to *very helpful*, and 5 corresponds to *extremely helpful*.

abuser down, and encouraging counseling for the batterer. Responses to open-ended questions indicate that these strategies provided a temporary means of coping with and attempting to mitigate the occurrence of abuse.

The greatest percentage of participants (88%) reported that they tried to placate the batterer, that is, do whatever he asks to calm him down: "Staying to myself, doing things the way he wanted them to be done. I did that just to stay alive. It worked, and I stayed alive long enough to get away." In line with qualitative research that has documented usage of personal strategies by non-Latinas (Lempert, 1996), acting submissively was an active choice participants made to survive abusive situations. However, consistent with previous research conducted with battered African American women (Goodman et al., 2003), this strategy was described as only *somewhat helpful*. Although this strategy afforded temporary safety for some women, placating the batterer generally did not mitigate violence. For most women, no matter what they did, they could not appease the batterer: "Whatever I did, I was still messing up. . . . I didn't do it quick enough, or right, or I'm just plain stupid." Obeying, placating, and calming the batterer also had consequences for some women's self esteem. Moreover, a few women described how this strategy kept alive the hope that

pleasing the abuser would result in change: “This [placating] kept my hope alive; it was like a trap. I thought I could make him happy . . . that I could change and then he would. But that wasn’t going to happen.” Thus, although temporarily ensuring some women’s safety (eventually enabling them to leave), placating damaged women’s sense of self-worth and sometimes contributed to keeping them in abusive situations.

Eighty percent of participants reported they tried to walk away from threatening situations, but found this strategy to be generally *not at all to somewhat* helpful because the abuser tended to be angrier when they returned. Trying to talk the abuser down was also utilized by 80% of the participants; again, this was deemed *not at all to somewhat helpful*, particularly when the batterer was intoxicated. Encouraging counseling for the abuser (67%) was found to be the least effective of all strategies to survive abuse because, from the abuser’s perspective, “I was the ‘crazy’ one who needed counseling—of course it wasn’t him!”

Defensive Strategies

Participants reported engaging in defensive strategies including protecting their bodies (68%), which was *somewhat to moderately helpful*; physically fighting back (61%), which was *not at all to somewhat helpful*; locking oneself in a room (51%), which was *not at all to somewhat* effective; and teaching children to call police (33%), which was *somewhat to moderately helpful*. Responses to open-ended questions indicated that these defensive strategies provided a means of temporarily (if not always effectively) protecting oneself in a dangerous context. For example, locking oneself in a room afforded temporary safety, although “he’d just unscrew the bolts and open the door.” To protect her body, one woman recalled cutting off her hair (so it could no longer be pulled). Many described covering their faces and cradling their pregnant stomachs. Fighting back often had the unfortunate consequences of escalating the abuser and resulting in the women’s arrest.

Spiritual/Psychological Strategies

Participants reported engaging in spiritual or psychological strategies to survive abuse, such as joining a support group and maintaining a relationship with God. Although these strategies were means of coping within the relationship, some of these strategies also helped motivate women to eventually leave the abusive situation. Consistent with previous research conducted with non-Latinas (Dunbar & Jeannechild, 1996), 71% of participants reported that maintaining a relationship with God was an important factor in surviving abuse. One woman explained, “I thought to myself, the Virgin was able to raise her child; she will give me strength to go on.” Faith helped most women to maintain hope, optimism, perseverance, and confidence they would be taken care of by a greater power.

In addition to the questionnaire items, participants' responses to open-ended questions included additional psychological strategies. These included staying optimistic, focusing on good times, forgiving, maintaining hope, and using humor to cope: "I would just try and forget about it [abuse] and think it was going to get better." A few women also described denial and avoidance to cope and get through the day: "Mainly, I would just try to ignore everything. If he hurt me, I tried to ignore it."

Social/Familial Strategies

In line with research that points to the importance of social support in African American battered women's survival (Rose & Campbell, 2000), the Mexican-origin women in this study reported engaging in a number of social or familial strategies to survive abuse: maintaining relationships with supportive people (51%), not involving family members to protect them (41%), and speaking with other battered women for support and advice (31%). Keeping alive social and familial ties appeared to both sustain many women while they were with the abuser and also provide the needed motivation and support for a few women to leave the abuser.

In addition to these questionnaire items, responses to open-ended questions indicated that particular family members—children—were central factors in participants' survival of and departure from abusive situations. For a few women, the children's presence provided women protection. Focusing on, fighting for, and aiming to be good examples for their children inspired most women to persevere through difficult situations: "I didn't want my son to see me as defeated; I'm an example for him." Children were the impetus for many women to eventually leave their abusers, often to prevent children from being the witnesses or targets of violence: "What finally made me kick him [abuser] out was when he went after my little boy. If it had only been me, I'd have taken the hits. But . . . all that matters to me is those kids." These responses support previous qualitative research conducted with a smaller sample of Mexican-origin battered women (Avecedo, 2000).

Escaping Strategies

Women reported engaging in a number of escaping strategies: moving to an undisclosed location (63%), disguising themselves (33%), and saving personal money (32%). These strategies were aimed at leaving the abusive situation. For example, saving one's own money provided financial independence for a few women and their children and means to escape. However, most women were not able to save their own money because of the abuser's economic control and/or their economic marginalization: "I couldn't get a job because I had no [legal] papers. . . . He [abuser] was very jealous and possessive and managed all the money." Also, lack of financial resources, as well as fear of being followed, prohibited many women from moving to an undisclosed location.

Mexican-origin women in this study engaged in a number of personal strategies to survive abuse. Although some strategies were deemed very helpful, others were decidedly ineffective. For example, the greatest percentage of participants (88%) reported that they tried to placate the batterer, that is, do whatever he asks to calm him. However, consistent with previous research conducted with battered African American women (Goodman et al., 2003), this strategy was described as minimally helpful. The most helpful strategy to survive abuse, as rated by those women who employed it (71%), was maintaining a relationship with God. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted with non-Latinas (Dunbar & Jeannechild, 1996).

Research with non-Latinas indicates that personal strategies to survive abuse, although representing important steps in battered women's eventual empowerment and survival (Campbell Ulrich, 1993), are experienced as less effective in terms of surviving abuse than accessing informal and formal sources of help (Bowker, 1983). Findings of the current study support the survivor theory perspective (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) for battered Mexican-origin women as well as previous findings for non-Latina battered women (Bowker, 1983) that many personal strategies are experienced as unhelpful in surviving abuse. As professionals and advocates, these results indicate that we can help women to recognize and own their agency and strength, and also to reflect on whether particular strategies—although temporary means of coping—may also function to keep them trapped in an abusive relationship.

Conclusion

Whereas prior research has documented non-Latina battered women's patterns of help-seeking (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004) and the barriers these women encounter (Fugate et al., 2005), this study examined these issues specifically for battered Latinas of Mexican origin. Previous research has explored which help sources battered Latinas tend to use (Dutton et al., 2000); this study examined the frequency and perceived effectiveness of help sought from various sources. This study also expanded the definition of help-seeking to include use of personal strategies to survive abuse.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study was its use of a sample comprised of women recruited mainly via local services and agencies, the majority of whom had left their abuser. Hence, these findings may not be generalizable to women from the broader community who have never left their abusers, never sought help, and perhaps not yet named their situations as abusive. A further limitation was the inability to follow up with the women in this study. Thus, it was impossible to know whether women who had left the abuser later returned, and whether help-seeking continued.

Another limitation of the study was the dependence on self-report measures and the social desirability bias, particularly given that participants represented a vulnerable population. In addition, the various positions of power that the PI occupied vis-à-vis the participants (being White, educated) likely influenced the process of conducting this research and, in turn, the results obtained. A final limitation to the present study was the unavailability of empirically validated measures of help-seeking and personal strategies to survive abuse for this population.

Future Research

It would be beneficial to replicate this study with a sample that is more representative of the broader community of battered Mexican-origin women. This would include Latinas who are still in abusive relationships and/or have never sought formal help. Ideally, a small group of participants would be engaged as coinvestigators. As “insiders,” these women might have better access to their peers still in abusive relationships. However, being that isolation is a key factor in domestic violence, this might be a challenge. Future research might longitudinally investigate sociocultural factors, such as immigration status, in relation to staying or leaving. Inclusion of such factors would be especially relevant to Latinas of Mexican-origin. Studies might also focus on different subgroups of battered Latinas to better understand help-seeking and survival strategies within particular sociocultural contexts. Finally, measures developed specifically for particular subgroups of battered women would be beneficial to the field.

Appendix

Measures Used in Study

Formal and Informal Help-Seeking Sample Item

Indicate whether you sought help from the following services or people *in the last six months of your most recent abusive relationship*.

- | | YES | NO |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Medical assistance from a clinic, emergency room, doctor, or nurse | | |
| a. If you answered “YES,” <i>how often</i> did you seek help here? | | |
| 1 = <i>never</i> (0 times); 2 = <i>once in a while</i> (1-2 times); 3 = <i>sometimes</i> (3-4 times); | | |
| 4 = <i>fairly often</i> (4-5 times); 5 = <i>very often</i> (over 6 times) | | |
| b. If you answered “YES,” <i>how helpful</i> was the help you received in aiding you to survive the abuse in your relationship? | | |
| 1 = <i>not at all helpful</i> ; 2 = <i>a little helpful</i> ; 3 = <i>moderately helpful</i> ; 4 = <i>very helpful</i> ; | | |
| 5 = <i>extremely helpful</i> | | |

This item format used for lawyer, shelter, women’s program, police, social worker, counselor, immediate family, extended family, partner’s family, friends, religious officials, and coworkers.

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

Personal Strategy Sample Item

Indicate whether you engaged in any of the following behaviors in *the last six months of your relationship*.

1. Walk away from threatening situation YES NO
 - a. If you answered "YES," *how often* did you use this strategy?

1 = *never* (0 times); 2 = *once in a while* (1-2 times); 3 = *sometimes* (3-4 times);
4 = *fairly often* (4-5 times); 5 = *very often* (over 6 times)
 - b. If you answered "YES," *how helpful* was this strategy in aiding you to survive the abuse in your relationship?

1 = *not at all helpful*; 2 = *a little helpful*; 3 = *moderately helpful*; 4 = *very helpful*;
5 = *extremely helpful*

Note: Item format used for lock self in room; hide/disguise; move to undisclosed location; placate partner; protect body when being abused; teach children to call the police; talk partner out of abuse; encourage partner to seek counseling; join community or religious group; rely on relationship with God; maintain relationships with supportive others; keep family/friends uninvolved to protect them; secretly save money; fight back; seek support/advice from other women.

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