Pergamon

Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 211–222, 2000

0277-5395/00/$–see front matter

PII S0277-5395(00)00073-X

THE LIVED BODY EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS: AN INTERROGATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

Jennifer K. Wesely
School of Justice Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-0403, USA

Maria T. Allison and Ingrid E. Schneider
Department of Recreation Management and Tourism, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-4915, USA

Synopsis — In this article, female identity is explored through an analysis of the lived body experience of domestic violence survivors. Qualitative interviews focused on the conceptual relationships between eight survivors and their bodies. The female body, as it is degraded and sexualized in patriarchal Western culture, is socially accepted as the core of female identity. Along with body awareness, the very identities of the abused women in this study seem to disappear, and we argue that this is largely made possible by these systems of patriarchal domination and definition. We also suggest the possibility of reclaiming the female self by reconnecting with the body. Based on the women's responses, we explore the feasibility of various recreational activities (e.g., sports, camping, hiking) as a means of reconnection and probe the ways that patriarchal norms may affect this aspect of recovery. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Feminist scholarship espouses the idea that domestic violence is a social problem born of patriarchy. Lempert (1996) notes that feminist scholars largely agree that the gendered nature of domestic violence maintains men's control over women and "support for these acts is built into culture and socialization" (p. 269). Using this feminist approach to domestic violence as our point of departure, we address the cultural construction of female identity within the context of domestic violence. The processing and negotiation of identity conveyed by the women interviewed is referred to here as the "lived body experience" of domestic violence, since in Western patriarchal society, women are consistently defined through their bodies. Indeed, the female body is largely conveyed through devalued reproductive, biologic, and sexual spheres (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Martin, 1992). The socially constructed female identity is represented by this fragmented body and separated from the mind. Susie Orbach (1986) notes that a woman learns to negotiate the world and identify herself with and through her body. The man, associated with the mind, is framed as disembodied (Olsen, 1996), while the woman is the embodied "Other," the deviation from the male norm (de Beauvoir, 1952).

Patriarchal notions also reinforce the idea that women's bodies are closer to nature; these associations of women and nature have been fodder for decades of feminist critique (de Beauvoir, 1952; Eisenstein, 1988; Gaard, 1993; Griffin, 1978; Johnson, 1993; Ortner, 1974). Such a critique addresses the parallels drawn between the female body and the fertility of nature that serve to reinforce the construction of "natural" gender difference and male domination: "While men are busy conquering and controlling nature and woman, women are obsessed with controlling their own bodies. . . . Woman is her mortal body" (Chapkis, 1986, p. 15). Since he is not confined to the body, the man seeks his fulfillment externally, through outside achieve-

The authors wish to thank the women in this study for their time and willingness to share their experiences and Dr. M. A. Bortner for her insightful comments and support.

ments (Chapkis, 1986; Ortner, 1974). The female identity, then, is cleaved apart from the mind and devalued in its physicality.

While the female body is perceived as deficient or tainted, it is simultaneously fetishized in its reduction to an object of (hetero)sexual desire. A woman's body is her identity, and she learns that her sexualized body is her value. Martin (1992) notes, "Women, it has been argued, suffer the alienation of parts of the self much more acutely than men. For one thing, becoming sexually female entails inner fragmentation of the self. A woman must become only a physical body in order to be sexual" (p. 21). Further, the endless "feminine" disciplines of adorning (shaping, covering, emphasizing) the body in order to be heterosexually attractive conspire to enslave women in a futile struggle:

> To succeed in the provision of a beautiful or sexy body gains a woman attention and some admiration but little real respect and rarely any social power. A woman's effort to master feminine body discipline will lack importance just because she does it: her activity partakes of the general depreciation of everything female. In spite of unrelenting pressure to "make the most of what they have," women are ridiculed and dismissed for the triviality of their interest in such "trivial" things as clothes and make-up. Further, the narrow identification of woman with sexuality and the body in a society that has for centuries displayed profound suspicion toward both does little to raise her status. (Bartky, 1990, p. 73)

The female body is made object, a spectacle for (hetero)sexual voyeurism; the male spectator's gaze upon her becomes her own critical gaze upon herself. Women then become, absurdly, both estranged from and obsessed with their bodies. As Chapkis (1986) notes, "Though woman is identified with body she can never be confidently convinced she is mistress over it" (p. 16).

These patriarchal tensions make problematic the woman's sense of female identity; they lead to a futile struggle toward ideals of womanhood that can result in self-alienation. This reality seldom has positive repercussions for women. Bordo (1993) notes, "For if . . . the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be . . ." (p. 5). Indeed, the powerfully undermining definitions of female identity have repercussions that span the spectrum from eating disorders to abuse. The body becomes enemy and Other, separate from yet fully representing woman, seemingly the only "reminder" of female inferiority and at the same time the golden ticket out. It is, as Bartky (1990) notes, "infatuation with an inferiorized body" (p. 40).

The female body, in its confusing and perhaps contradictory relationship to the female identity, takes on particular significance for women in abusive relationships. In the most obvious sense, the body becomes a complete betrayal; defenselessness is embodied in the flesh. In situations of abuse, the victim separates more and more from her body, feeling that it is the enemy. Extreme separation from the body, "disassociation," is used to describe a victim's experience of "watching" the abuse from another location, literally stepping outside her own body and observing. A victim's body is then dominated or abused against her will, but her mind cleaves apart from this violation of identity (Manlowe, 1995). Disassociation may be predicated by the abuser's attempts to destroy female identity through attacks on the body. Lempert (1996) notes that the female body is "fused with a sense of self and that women's bodies are vehicles through which men try to exercise control of women's identities. . . . Women's bodies became the arenas where men located their control" (p. 285). Beyond the abuse itself, other physical and mental problems incurred by female victims of domestic violence include fatigue, backaches, headaches, general restlessness, and inability to sleep (Walker, 1979). In their research, Stark and Flitcraft (1996) noted that in addition to physical injury, battered women experience a range of problems manifested through the body.

Women who experience abuse are alienated from themselves in the most profound sense. A woman *already* exists in a devalued and sexually objectified body around which her identity revolves. Within the context of gendered violence, then, the woman appears to absolve herself of this body, to absolve herself of being a woman. Following a linear pattern, we might assert that domestic violence effectively "completes" the process–that the

tenuous connections between mind and body in the fragmented female identity are severed. Yet we suggest this process may not be as linear as it appears.

Through an inquiry into the lived body experiences of eight domestic violence survivors, we investigate how they negotiate their female identities while coping with abusive relationships. We build on Lempert's (1994) idea that the dissociation of mind and body is an act designed to preserve a measure of autonomy for domestic violence survivors. Yet the mind/body dichotomy—articulated by both interviewees and ourselves as researchers—can reflect patriarchal constructions of female identity. We try to hear women's responses from a position that does not categorize their identity negotiation as one of binaries. In our investigation of the lived body experiences of the interviewees, we assert the separation of mind and body is not final; the women may intermittently lose, construct or refashion their sense of self, all the while doing so in order to survive. Further, we analyze how recovery and reclamation of identity for these women relates to their bodies, and what types of recovery are possible when they may be consistently thwarted by patriarchal society's limited perceptions of female identity. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the abuser fragments the female identity of his victim, and to discuss how these domestic violence survivors, from the perspective of the lived body experience, renegotiate their identities. Our analysis unites issues of female identity and domestic violence from the perspective of the female body as lived experience.

METHODS

This article addresses conceptual relationships between survivors of domestic violence and their socially constructed female identities. It focuses on violence against women within traditional, heterosexual couples. The most appropriate individuals for study were those who identified themselves as survivors; the term *survivor* indicates one who is in the process of gaining awareness of and/or healing from an abusive relationship. Purposive or judgmental sampling was acceptable as a means of accessing this population. The method of purposive sampling is "a small subset of a larger population in which many members of the subset are easily identified, but the enumeration of all of them would be nearly impossible" (Babbie, 1995, p. 225). A domestic violence shelter in the Phoenix-metropolitan area of Arizona was the setting and source of respondents for this study. The respondents were residents of the shelter or members of an outpatient group affiliated with the facility who volunteered to participate after being given a description of the study.

Several sources of data were used in this analysis. First, the primary researcher served as a volunteer client advocate for nearly 1 year (January 1996 to January 1997) at the shelter. In this capacity, the researcher had the opportunity to interact with clients on a daily basis, speak with and formally interview staff, observe client sessions on crisis intervention, and ultimately "work the phones" when women called the shelter for help. These observations and interactions were maintained in a journal and helped frame the scope of the study, and inform subsequent analyses. This prolonged engagement increased awareness of dynamics among clients and recurrent issues concerning financial, emotional, and social independence for the women (Facio, 1993).

The primary data collection technique involved in-depth qualitative interviews ($n = 8$) with domestic violence survivors from the shelter. Guiding questions were asked in conjunction with a flexible framework of main discussion issues. Discussion issues addressed the client's personal history, level of physical activity, perceptions and control of the physical self, perceptions of the emotional and spiritual self, sense of self as a woman, amount and type of outdoor experiences, feelings about nature, and sense of safety. Lasting an average of 2 hours, these semi-structured, open-ended personal interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Several strategies were used to analyze the data. First, as the interviews were conducted, the researcher executed ongoing analyses of data in order to identify emergent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Notations were kept during interviews for newly surfacing issues and insights. As the data were transcribed and analyzed, themes emerged in conjunction with the interview questions concerning client history and abuse, perceptions of the body, and dimensions of physical activity. Through persistent analysis, patterns emerged which shared similar theo-

retical features; such patterns were clustered into related dimensions. (The names used in the data analysis are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the women interviewed.)

Description of respondents

The age of interviewees ranged from 26 to 54 years. The study included two Hispanic and six Caucasian females. All survivors had been involved in at least one abusive relationship, and in some cases, the relationship was to some degree ongoing at the time of the interview. The length of the interviewee's involvement in an abusive relationship varied from 4 months to 31 years. The median number of years married to, or living with, an abuser was 8 years, although several of the respondents had been in and out of abusive marriages/relationships previously. Not all interviewees were married to their abuser; at the time of the interview, three of the women had been most recently abused by a man with whom they had an unmarried relationship (two of these women had been married previously to abusive men). Six of the eight interviewees had at least one child, either through their current or a previous relationship. Of the five interviewees who had been married to their abuser, four met their abuser and had children while in their teenage years. These characteristics are also displayed in Table 1.

Limitations

It is imperative to also acknowledge the prevalence of same-sex battering. In fact, some researchers assert that battering within lesbian relationships is even more violent than heterosexually abusive individuals (Dutton, 1995). Battering within homosexual relationships does support the patriarchal paradigm as a major cause. As Tifft (1993) notes, "Like men who batter women, many women who batter women have learned violence from the heterosexual, male-dominated world in which they have grown up" (p. 21). Violence within homosexual relationships warrants further study but was beyond the scope of this investigation.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, the primary researcher left the interviews as open-ended as possible. Several of the interviewees articulated their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their circumstances. Regardless, the interviews were still an intrusive measure into the women's lives. That fact, combined with the power differential between the interviewee and a researcher from the academy, may have influenced responses. In addition, the interview setting was situated to address particular issues. As Dyck, Lynam, and Anderson (1995) note, "The in-depth interview situation is itself a social context, with attendant social practices, which has been constructed with the intent to search for meaning through the negotiation of understandings about topics of interest" (p. 623). We recognize that these may have been limitations to our research.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE FEMALE IDENTITY

In our study, the respondents' involvement in violent relationships is built on a history of abuse, experienced both as adults and often as children. This history, although not the focus of the investigation, reminds us that each woman's interpretation of her abusive rela-

Table 1. Description of Respondents

Name	Age (Years)	Relationship History
Annie	48	Separated for 2 months from 31-year abusive marriage; one child, aged 32
Erin	41	Dating abuser 1 year; sporadic cohabitation
Isabel	54	Divorced from first marriage of 27 years for 16 years; married to recent abuser who is 23 years her senior; four adult children
Jill	31	Separated after being married to abuser for 12 years; four young children
Judy	38	Dated most recent abuser for 1 year; divorced from abusive marriage of 7 years
Mindy	28	Separated but married to abuser for 7 years; divorced from previous abuser; four children
Nina	50	Dating abuser for 4 years; abuser 25 years old; divorced for 4 years from abusive marriage of 10 years; divorced from first marriage of 3 years; 13-year-old daughter
Tanya	26	Separated but still married to abuser for 8 years; three young children

tionship is grounded in a complex web of experiences that she herself attempts to understand and negotiate. One interviewee noted:

> Most women, the first time they're hit, or emotionally abused by a man, if they have never had a history of it, are going to walk away and tell them to hit the road. Most women would not allow that to happen. Most [battered] women have come from that. That's one thing I have learned over the years are the cycles. Just incredible cycles that need to be broken. In my situation, before I started recovery with my father, dealing with incest and abuse there I didn't know that he was incested by his mother and abused and abandoned. . . . (Judy)

As they escaped the abusive home environment as children, several of these women were catapulted directly into violent adult relationships.

> You know the first year or two I was happy I was getting all this attention because it was like, he's being so nice to me, wants to be with me all the time . . . I'd get out of school at 3:15 and he'd be calling at 3:30 and my mother would say you need to be with your friends and I would say, well, what does she know. He's just calling to see what kind of plans we're going to have tonight. But what does a 15-year-old girl think? (Annie)

Some learned to feel as though abusive relationships were better than no relationship at all; desperate to be loved, they became trapped in their own feelings of unworthiness.

> Because we get stuck. Where else are we going to go, who else is gonna want us? I just want to be loved. I must not be worthy of someone who is good to me, and so I'll take what I can get. So you take what you can get. . . . So you're set in your mind, unless you've got something much greater that you can grab onto to give you strength and give you hold, you fall back into the same, your own stuff. It's really very sad. (Judy)

It is important to note that not all adults in abusive relationships were abused or witnessed abuse as children; likewise, not all children who experience abuse or dysfunction become involved in similar adult relationships. In this study, growing up with a family history of abuse and dysfunction, combined with the unmet need for love and attention, became these women's blueprint for the problems that were to come.

"A monster trying to pull the strings on my life"

The systematic breakdown of the survivor's female identity, rooted in her body, began with the abuser's techniques of power and control. These techniques reshaped each woman's lived body experiences within the domestic violence context:

> What we didn't take into account was that he was used to controlling everything. . . . It seemed like the most minimal thing in the house he had to have control over. It was immediate that I felt that I had a monster trying to pull strings on my life. (Isabel)

The abuser's tactics went well beyond the control of money, time, and resources. His strategies of control often focused directly on his victim's female body identity:

> He took everything he knew about me and used it against me. Any of the things that were my weaknesses or my insecurities, like not being able to have children, or the fact that all these men dumped me . . . he'd say things like, "Boy, this really makes me a great man, doesn't it? Thirty years old, got a hold of a 38-year-old has-been with huge tits and no children." Mean. Words to hurt, words to stab. Anything that could cut deep. . . . (Judy)

Judy's quote above reflects how easily the abuser pinpoints the woman's most vulnerable areas: childbearing skills (she's barren), her rejection by men (she's sexually undesirable), her age and her physical appearance (culturally, a woman's worst enemy). In a few swift sentences, Judy's abuser was able to reduce her female identity to a pile of inadequacies—or, perhaps, reinforce that it was already so reduced.

Tanya's experience was similar. The debasement came in the form of a verbal attack of her sexualized body.

> He goes, "I've been cheating on you every year, don't you understand I don't love you?

> I'm going to tell you something. I never loved you, I used you." He said, "I think you are like, I feel nothing for you. I look at you, I feel total disgust that I ever married you." He said, "I never loved you because I think you're fat, you're ugly, I think you're a bitch," and he goes "The best thing I ever did was leave you. I can't believe you took me back all those times after I did the worst thing to you each time so that you wouldn't take me back again." He goes, "I have a great woman now, she's a lot of fun, she's got a nice body, she gives me great sex, I think she's the best thing that ever happened to me." (Tanya)

The value Tanya's abuser placed on her replacement, the "great" woman, revolves around her sexual body and her willingness to engage in sexual intercourse. At the same time, he denigrated Tanya's identity as a woman by calling her fat and ugly, and blamed her for his "disgust."

Tanya's husband also refused to buy her food for days during her pregnancy; she subsisted mainly on macaroni and cheese. He would not allow her to leave the house and since he did not "believe in" grocery shopping, the stress and poor diet caused Tanya to develop toxemia. Her husband claimed that her toxemia developed because of her penchant for pizza. The specific animosity projected upon Tanya's pregnant body reveals another layer of control that necessitates comment: the fact that abuse can be especially severe during the woman's pregnancy. As Browne (1997) notes, "Medical sources now suggest that up to 37 percent of obstetric patients—across all class, race and educational lines—are physically attacked by an intimate partner sometime during the three trimesters" (p. 53). The batterer's fear and hatred of female identity is represented in the attack. Tanya's abuser, for instance, threw the television remote control at her stomach while she was pregnant. Erin, another survivor, spoke about being punched by her abuser and a subsequent miscarriage.

Part of the dominant patriarchal ideology includes the "blaming the victim" strategy, designed to strip the victim of power or defenses (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1983; Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979). After being denigrated repeatedly, the women themselves began to put the onus of blame for the abuse and failure of the relationship on themselves. Judy felt she was to blame for the abuse:

> Cause something obviously tells my head that there's something wrong with me that these people could treat me this way. And I know the things that I do. Like I know I work hard. I know the things tangible that I do so I know it can't be those things. So it must be something about me. And one thing I do know about myself is that I'm a nice, caring person. I may not have a lot of love for myself but I do know those things. So when you take all the variables away, what's left? (Judy)

Further, the woman's "failure" usually revolved around issues rooted in the female body. As with Judy's quote at the beginning of this section, the abuser attacked what the woman knows as her female identity. After pointing out how she falls short as a woman, the abuser blamed her for this apparent deficiency—as does society.

"Aren't those pants too tight?"

The critique of the woman's physical appearance, especially in terms of make-up and clothing style, emerged as yet another form of abuser control related to the sexualized female body. The women related feelings of "walking on eggshells" with their abuser, viewing him as a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde hybrid unpredictably sent into rages; they felt that their sexual body was constantly an issue no matter how they presented themselves. Annie's abuser frequently accused her of sexual infidelity. She says, "That was always our major problem, that he felt I was unfaithful to him." Issues of extreme and violent sexual jealousy (representative of the culturally exaggerated notions of the woman as an uncontrollable sexual body) also arose with other women interviewed and are common with domestic violence (Cardarelli, 1997; Tifft, 1993; Walker, 1979). Annie adds,

> He'd go one way or the other. If he saw me wearing something I felt comfortable with, he'd say, "Why are you dressing like an old lady?" Or it'd be a putdown, with, "Are those pants too tight?" It'd be one way or another, it didn't really matter. I didn't know which way he was going to come with his re-

> actions. . . . I can remember him getting angry with me because someone told me I had a nice dress. You know, it was like, Oh God, don't say that! I don't want to hear this because I know he's going to react to it.

Mindy described how her husband insulted her for wearing something revealing, insinuating she was dressing "for" someone else; nonetheless, he wanted her to dress provocatively when they went out together. The vacillation between extremes reflects a virgin/whore complex implicit in the one-dimensional view of female identity. According to Griffin (1981), "Here we find an old and familiar duality. Now the body and the soul, which we are used to thinking of as divided, are represented by the virgin and the whore" (p. 21). Yet this is not so simple, because, as Griffin adds, "Yet in the pornographic mind, all along, the virgin *is* a whore" (p. 23).

> I remember him making a remark one time, cause the way I got dressed up, if I ever got raped he'd never want me again. Just, he'd come up with a lot of good ones, to make me feel like . . . you know, sit and worry about what I was putting on, or if I was going to put my make-up on, is he gonna be, ohmigosh, didn't put it on all day, is he going to think something. But then at times he wouldn't want nothing to do with me unless I was dressed up in something. It was extreme. You always had to sit and figure out his games. (Mindy)

Mindy became a one-dimensional sex object called upon and yet rejected in her role of whore/virgin. She was possession and commodity in this restrictive definition of body. Reminds Irigaray (1985),

> Women, stop trying. You have been taught that you were property, private or public, belonging to one man or all. To family, tribe, State, even a Republic. . . . That pleasure was, for you, always tied to pain, but that such was your nature. If you disobeyed, you were the cause of your own unhappiness. (p. 203)

The woman under patriarchy is reduced to her sexual self. Dimen (1989) states, "I am a body on the street. Two tits and no head and a big ass. I am a walking Rorschach. My body becomes a cunt and I am sore from this semiotic rape" (p. 37).

The woman's body, molded and critiqued by the male gaze, never truly belongs to her. It is not unimaginable, then, that an abuser can turn his warped attentions upon the woman and she might see herself from his gaze, much as she does the patriarchal one. He comes to control every dimension of her existence with a physical and emotional cruelty that attempts to undermine her agency. The next two sections explore the ways the women seemed alienated from themselves, and how their sense of identity loss is embedded in the body.

"I Just don't feel like my body is mine"

The abuser is able to systematically fragment the woman's identity through techniques of power and control, but patriarchy has begun this process already. Women's deficiencies and implicit "lack" are reinforced as part of what is "feminine" in Western culture. Says Judy,

> But one of the hardest things to overcome, if you're not given that sense of, when I walk out into the world I'm going to be OK, that's one of the hardest things in this world to learn, to overcome that sense of insecurity. So abused women are just a part of that. They were taught the wrong thing. Somebody found the line. They spend a lifetime trying to unfeed it out of their mind. And a lot of these women [in the shelter] are beautiful, but if you asked them, when they look in the mirror what they see, I think you'd be real surprised. . . .

The reflection in the mirror is more than distorted; it seems, quite simply, absent. The women described themselves as robots, having separated themselves from what the culture tells them is womanly—their bodies. Mindy says,

> I was a very outgoing, active person. When I was in the situation I completely closed myself off, I just quit doing anything and everything. The first few years that were really bad, I just shut myself up. I probably didn't even go out of my house. . . . You're emotionally exhausted. You just feel like you couldn't handle doing anything. Anything was too stressful to do. . . . I'd be more tired going through a bad day with him than I

> would be exercising all day. It's very exhausting. Just leaves you physically like you have no energy.

Physical abuse alone severely thwarts a woman's sense of agency (Walker, 1979). The responses of the women in this study also clarify how they became drained beyond any physical capacity as they constantly attempted to defend their core identities as women and to monitor their partner's behavior so as to prevent further attack. In a reinforcing pattern, the women became increasingly depressed and de-energized while losing connection with their body and its physical abilities. Noted Isabel, "I got very depressed. So my energy level did change. There were days when I just slept all day. I felt so hopeless." According to Annie, "You just feel so beaten up, so wore out, that it's like, you feel fatigued all the time." Erin believed she spent all of her time concentrating on why the relationship was not working. "I was in emotional turmoil all the time, because I felt like something wasn't right. . . . I was constantly trying to figure out what was wrong." Jill noted that she never went out or "did anything with anybody," and was always depressed. She closed her curtains and would sit in the darkness during the day.

Jill mentioned that she used to get sick frequently, after being told by her abuser, "That I couldn't do anything. Over and over and over." Said Mindy, "I felt very weak. I don't know if that was mentally or actual, or just the way he made me feel." Judy's experience was similar:

> It's amazing how much you can harm your body when you're emotionally down. You cause your body to have a whole series of problems, through stress and emotional pain. Headaches, back stress, and that can lead to headaches, stomach pain. You can really harm your body. As a result of being emotionally in pain. (Judy)

The psychosomatic discomfort the women endured due to their violent situation is consistent with literature (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). Some of the women became so alienated from their bodies that they seemed to disassociate completely. This type of mental detachment is prevalent in survivors of abuse (Lempert, 1994). Tanya's relationship to her physical self was clarified by just a few words, "I just don't feel like my body's mine. I feel like I lost it during that time."

"It's like I would be in the mirror, but I wouldn't be in the mirror"

Mind and body were separated as a reaction, defense, and method of survival for these women; the alienation they felt from their bodies reflects the self-alienation they experienced as women. They learned to minimize "feminine" practices in the hopes that this would diffuse the anger of their abusers. Says Annie, "I always felt like, with my husband, I didn't want to ever try looking like I wanted a lot of make-up on, or jewelry on, I didn't want to draw any attention to me. . . . I'd rather wear clothes that cover me up more than reveal anything I have. The plainer the better." Yet defined patriarchally, the female body is (re)created to solicit the male gaze. How then does an abused woman know herself? Earlier, we noted the objectification of women, the patriarchal male gaze, and the duality of female consciousness. But when the abused woman looks in the mirror, she does not see an objectified other. She sees nothing. Annie explains, "It would be like I would be in the mirror but I wouldn't be in the mirror, does that make sense?" The female identity, already objectified and degraded, became ghostly. Heywood (1998) claims that an abuse survivor "can feel a form of death that makes her an eviscerated ghost" (p. 143).

It is at this point that the female identity becomes extremely problematic for these women. If the female body defines the self, they are alienated from their bodies in the sense that they have no bodies; they are alienated from themselves in the sense that they have no self. Mindy's identity confusion was revealed in her uncertainty of boundaries and personal reality:

> I still feel very weak, like I don't have any limits or boundaries. . . . You don't feel normal anymore. You don't trust any thought you have, you don't . . . everything you feel or think you don't know if it's real or if it's right. . . . So you don't react normally. I don't feel like I know who I am or how I should or would react to things. . . . And I really don't know what's normal anymore. So you don't

know if you're having a normal thought or normal reaction.

This echoes Dimen's (1989) description of a woman walking down a street: "This is the experience of domination, the loss of one's sense of and wish for autonomy, as a result of processes that play on one's doubts about the reality and validity of one's self, one's perceptions, and one's values" (p. 37). Mindy also sensed she had lost her capacity to "feel." She watches her children react to a situation in the movies or hears someone tell a story and is unable to conjure a heartfelt response. "I find myself trying to act upset or act shocked just to know that I'm responding somehow. . . . It's like, I gotta tell myself, oh, they just said something, I should be shocked or something." The women continually related this numbness to their lack of female identity. In the words of Annie, "I think the abuse just numbed me to the point where I think I'm a woman in a shell."

RE-NEGOTIATING FEMALE IDENTITY

The above sections describe the systematic fragmentation of female identity as lived body experiences for the domestic violence survivors interviewed. However, this destabilization was also appropriated by the women in their attempts to renegotiate their identities. According to Bordo (1993), women both collude with *and* resist definitions of female identity. Yet this dichotomy of resistance/collusion oversimplifies the complexity of female identity and the identity struggles these women manifested through their bodies. Even at the height of abuse, some of the women made efforts to enjoy their bodies in ways which defied patriarchal constructions of female identity. However, interviewees noted that their abusers continually thwarted attempts to pursue activities that emphasized their strength, power, and agency. Annie explains, "But I couldn't just go for a walk. I'd have to say, would you like to come with me?" Tanya's husband reacted similarly:

> He used to think it was stupid. We had this park, it was a park up in the woods. And I always liked to go there, and he'd be like, why do you want to go there? All of our friends would go there at night, just to spend time alone. And he'd be like, this is ridiculous. (Tanya)

Tanya also enjoyed softball immensely. By her own admission, she also excelled at the game, saying that she "would have gotten a scholarship for softball," had she chosen that path rather than to marry and have children. At one point during her abusive relationship, with the encouragement of a neighbor, she became enthused about a women's softball league. She dug out her mitt and became excited, saying, "Hey, I'm getting a workout, I'll be meeting people. Heck, this is really good even if it's one day a week." Tanya describes her husband's reaction, "And he would tell me, how in the world are you going to have time for that. I was like, I'll make time, I love softball." In response, her husband broke her hand. As her doctor reported, it was shattered into 15 pieces. Because of permanent injury to her hand, Tanya can never catch a ball in her mitt again. Her hand is testimony to her abuse:

> And then, all of a sudden, he did it to this hand. . . . I mean, that's a reminder every day. You go to pick up something, you don't have the strength. I could put my hand in the oven and not feel it. [Speaking of abuser] You took that away. I could have maybe not had use of my hand again. I can't play softball anymore. He knew how much I loved softball. Why couldn't it have been this hand; why did it have to be this hand? (Tanya)

Other obstacles to the women's pursuit of physical activity during the abusive relationship included the chronic fatigue, depression, defense mechanisms of disassociation, and withdrawal from the self mentioned above. During Mindy's abusive situation, she completely lacked the confidence to play sports. "I know while I was with him I was terrified to even go play softball cause I didn't feel like I could. . . . I was like, oh my gosh, I'm just going to mess up the team. I can't do this, I can't do that."

Based on the words of the interviewees, we suggest that physical activity is a vital aspect of identity renegotiation and healing for domestic violence survivors. Recreational physical activities, such as sports, walking, and camping, were identified by these women as important vehicles towards holistic healing. Also to be considered are hobbies of a less physical nature like reading or knitting; these opportunities should be explored. In this study, however, the women interviewed emphasized physical/

recreational activity. Mindy describes her involvement in sport as a way of renegotiating an empowering sense of identity. She plays a different sport every night of the week, and when people ask her how she gets through each day, she credits her activity. She says,

> Being in a relationship like this takes all that [sense of self] from you. About the only way to get that back is to be involved with something. You have to have physical [activity] to feel like . . . no one can sit there after you've been through all that and say, oh, you're good, you're strong, you can do this, you can do that. So you don't believe it. It's like, gosh, I can do this! Look what I did! You can't . . . there's no way in the world you can say, oh, he's gone, I'm fine, everything he made me feel isn't true. It doesn't happen. . . . If I can do sports, something like that, it gives me a chance to feel like I'm focusing on myself. And doing something for myself. (Mindy)

Rewarding activity for survivors of abuse need not be strenuous in order to be beneficial. In fact, physical challenges may potentially revictimize the survivor, since extreme stress may inspire a defense not unlike her reaction to abuse (Mitten, 1994). Simply going for a walk outdoors is a positive use of the body. Annie had never been camping until her sister took her to a nearby lake for a long weekend. At this point, Annie had been separated from her abuser for 2 months. She still remained fatigued and somewhat depressed at home, dealing with her daily emotions. But she felt the camping trip was pivotal in her healing process. She noted, "I think probably the camping was the turning point when I felt like I was starting to feel rejuvenated." On the trip she went on walks alone, observed the beauty around the lake, and "reflected on my problems."

Leslie Heywood (1998) was abused and raped. She now believes that weightlifting helps her to connect positively with her body. She asks, "What is it about a rape or other forms of violence that make a woman feel she has been erased from this world? Abuse has the function of wiping you out, erasing your singularity, damping the liveliness in your soul with a single stroke" (p. 145). And she reclaims herself: "It's because of bodybuilding that I'm not ready to die yet. Because of bodybuilding and feminism, I can live. . . . It helps me rage, and think, and feel, and breathe. . . ." (p. 146). Many of the survivors in this study felt that some form of activity (e.g., sport, camping, hiking) was essential to their reclamation of the unity of body, mind, and spirit.

The concept that recreation/physical activity can be rehabilitative and restorative is not new. There is a great deal of research that indicates that such activity may foster a range of psychosocial benefits including identity affirmation (Haggard & Williams, 1991), personal enjoyment, personal growth, social harmony, and social change (Wankel & Berger, 1991). Magraw (1984) asserts, "We must work to physically educate women to feel good about their bodies, to claim them as their own, to feel their strength" (p. 5). As Heywood (1998) says of her nearly 20-year experience of bodybuilding and recovery from violence, "The practice of lifting and developing strength can make a woman who has been physically or emotionally abused and diminished feel stronger, more invincible, more whole. . . ." (p. 187). Yet little is known about the real benefits of such activities for survivors of domestic violence. Several authors note caution in the simplistic view that any activity may serve a rehabilitative function. The current nature and organization of many sport, fitness, or adventure activities like Outward Bound are based on patriarchal models that valorize conquering obstacles and completing challenging tasks (Mitten, 1994). The patriarchal notions of stress and challenge often prevalent in activities with traditional models can be profoundly destructive and revictimizing when applied to female survivors of abuse (Levine, 1994; Mitten, 1994; Mitten & Dutton, 1993). The question then becomes, can programs with a traditional male model ever encourage empowerment and self-worth for women, or do they embrace notions that these survivors should try to avoid at all costs?

CONCLUSIONS

Our investigation explored the lived body experiences of survivors of domestic violence. In most Western approaches to this type of analysis, the emotional and mental effects of abuse are prioritized and are portrayed in a dichotomous relationship with the body. This investigation, while not ignoring the importance of the mental/emotional condition of abused

women, focused on their lived body experiences as a way of acknowledging the complexity of female identity.

The results of this investigation reveal that the power and control of the abuser permeate every component of the woman's physical presence. The abuser begins his domination over her body by controlling multiple dimensions of her life. The survivor's physical self becomes foregrounded as the abuser fixates on everything from her make-up to style and manner of dress. The woman begins to question her entire physical presentation, knowing the consequences if her abuser is displeased. As the abuse continues, the woman starts to disconnect from her body, as a mechanism of defense and even survival. She becomes emotionally exhausted and physically spent, suffering fatigue, anguish, illness, and emotional turmoil; she also begins to isolate herself from others, to some extent by choice, but largely at the abuser's insistence. In many cases, the abuser finds a new "partner" and uses sexual or intimate details of his new relationship to further denigrate the woman. He ridicules her sexuality, her physical dimensions, and her general appearance to make her feel ugly and undesirable. Seeing herself through his eyes and eventually trying to avoid being seen at all, the abused woman may lose sight of herself. As Annie says, "It's like I would be in the mirror but I wouldn't be in the mirror."

Despite the depth of pain that takes place for these women, they struggle to maintain a sense of self during and after the abusive relationship. Even dissociation can be an act of self-preservation, an unwillingness to "lose the total self" (Lempert, 1994, p. 433) during abuse. The identity negotiation that takes place after women are out of the abusive relationship involves a restructuring of the self (Riessman, 1989), but we found that this negotiation also occurs during the relationship. The women's attempts to be physically active during the abusive relationship, although often thwarted by the abuse(r), reflect their attempts to renegotiate and reframe their perceptions of self. Merely being active felt empowering. What's more, the relationship between the body and female identity in this positive context avoids conventional framing of female identity. Yet for all the *attempts* the interviewees made to be active, very few succeeded, at least during the violent relationship. Iris Young (1980) stated that all young girls in sexist society are physically handicapped. This bold statement alludes to the degree to which Western patriarchal culture defines the parameters of resistance and agency. Frances Olsen (1996) asks how one might reject the *meaning* ascribed to a body without rejecting this body itself. This study has shown that such body "rejection" is often born of violence and breeds female alienation of the self, which reinforces the social arrangements set up by patriarchy. Yet we have also shown that although abused women preserve their agency fundamentally through defense mechanisms like dissociation, they still attempt to be active within the abusive relationship. The multiplicity of ways this is manifested—through attempts to play sports, desire to take walks, and so forth—show that the women continue to try to claim their bodies. In doing so, they challenge the social and intimate oppression of their female identities. Their lived body experiences indicate potentials for female empowerment even as the body is the site of the struggle.

We must continue to explore how abused women relate to their bodies and how they might be empowered through those bodies. For instance, what precludes some traditionally patriarchal models of activity from providing women with opportunities to subvert or resist the oppressive ideology within that model? What about conventionally driven motivations for activity that morph into something subversive? Bordo (1993) notes that the woman who begins to weight-train for conventional motives (like sexual attractiveness) may find that her increased strength also increases her self-confidence to the extent that she becomes much more assertive. Thus, the woman initially acts in accordance with patriarchal convention, but identity renegotiation can emerge and persist. As noted previously, several authors suggest that traditional activity contexts may recreate the patriarchal system of domination (Levine, 1994; Mitten, 1994; Mitten & Dutton, 1993). Such contexts may be extremely damaging for survivors, but do others provide opportunities to gain skills for "dealing with" patriarchy—learning to resist, as it were, gendered abuse? Melia (1995) counters, "It is not always possible to use our bodies to make a statement of resistance" (p. 550). Perhaps if we continue to look at the many ways we can renegotiate female identities through

our bodies, resistance will not seem so radical a possibility.

REFERENCES

Babbie, Earl. (1995). *The practice of social research.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Bartky, Sandra L. (1990). *Femininity and domination.* New York: Routledge.

Browne, Angela. (1997). Violence in marriage: Until death do us part? In Albert Cardarelli (Ed.), *Violence between intimate partners: Patterns, causes and effects* (pp. 48–69). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bordo, Susan. (1993). *Unbearable weight.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cardarelli, Albert. (Ed.). (1997). *Violence between intimate partners: Patterns, causes, and effects.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Chapkis, Wendy. (1986). *Beauty secrets: Women and the politics of appearance.* Boston: South End Press.

de Beauvoir, Simone. (1952). *The second sex.* New York: Vintage Books.

Dimen, Muriel. (1989). Power, sexuality, and intimacy. In Alison Jaggar & Susan Bordo (Eds.), *Gender/body/knowledge* (pp. 34–51). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Dutton, Donald G. (1995). *The batterer: A psychological profile.* New York: Basic Books.

Dyck, Isabel, Lynam, Judith M., & Anderson, Joan M. (1995). Women talking—Creating knowledge through difference in cross-cultural research. *Women's Studies International Forum, 18*, 611–626.

Eisenstein, Zillah. (1988). *The female body and the law.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Facio, Elisa. (1993). Ethnography as personal experience. In John H. Stanfield, II & Rutledge M. Dennis (Eds.), *Race and ethnicity in research methods* (pp. 75–91). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Gaard, Greta. (Ed.). (1993). *Ecofeminism.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Griffin, Susan. (1978). *Women and nature.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Griffin, Susan. (1981). *Pornography and silence.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Haggard, Lois, & Williams, Daniel. (1991). Self-identity benefits of leisure activities. In Beverly L. Driver, Perry Brown, & George Peterson (Eds.), *Benefits of leisure* (pp. 103–120). State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Heywood, Leslie. (1998). *Bodymakers: A cultural anatomy of women's bodybuilding.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Holmstrom, Lynda L., & Burgess, Ann W. (1983). *The victim of rape.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Irigaray, Luce. (1985). *This sex which is not one.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. (1993). *Women, earth, and creator spirit.* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Lempert, Lora B. (1994). A narrative analysis of abuse: Connecting the personal, the rhetorical, and the structural. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 22*, 411–441.

Lempert, Lora B. (1996). Women's strategies for survival: Developing agency in abusive relationships. *Journal of Family Violence, 11*, 269–289.

Levine, Deborah. (1994). Breaking through barriers: Wilderness therapy for sexual assault survivors. *Women and Therapy, 15*(3/4), 175–184.

Magraw, Sukie. (1984). *Women's bodies in a man's world: Working paper no. 143.* Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

Manlowe, Jennifer. (1995). *Faith born of seduction.* New York: New York University Press.

Martin, Del. (1976). *Battered wives.* San Francisco, CA: Glide Publications.

Martin, Emily. (1992). *The woman in the body.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Melia, Julie. (1995). An honest human body: Sexuality and the continuum of resistance. *Women's Studies International Forum, 18*, 547–557.

Miles, Matthew B., & Huberman, A. Michael. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Mitten, Denise. (1994). Ethical considerations in adventure therapy: A feminist critique. *Women and Therapy, 15*, 55–83.

Mitten, Denise, & Dutton, Rosalind. (1993). Outdoor leadership considerations with women survivors of sexual abuse. *The Journal of Experiential Education, 16*, 7–13.

Olsen, Frances. (1996.) Do (only) women have bodies? In Pheng Cheah, David Fraser, & Judith Grbich (Eds.), *Thinking through the body of the law* (pp. 209–226). Washington Square, NY: New York University Press.

Orbach, Susie. (1986). *Hunger strike: The anorectic's struggle as a metaphor for our age.* London: Faber and Faber.

Ortner, Sherry. (1974). Is female to male as nature is to culture? In Michelle Z. Rosaldo & Louise Lamphere (Eds.), *Women, culture and society* (pp. 67–87). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Riessman, Catherine K. (1989). From victim to survivor: A woman's narrative reconstruction of marital sexual abuse. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 59*, 232–251.

Stark, Evan, & Flitcraft, Anne. (1996). *Women at risk: Domestic violence and women's health.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tifft, Larry. (1993). *Battering of women.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Walker, Lenore E. (1979). *The battered woman.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Wankel, Leonard, & Berger, Bonnie. (1991). The personal and social benefits of sport and physical activity. In Beverly L. Driver, Perry Brown, & George Peterson (Eds.), *Benefits of leisure* (pp. 121–145). State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Young, Iris. (1980). Throwing like a girl: A phenomenology of feminine body comportment motility and spatiality. *Human Studies, 3*, 137–168.