

Why Victims of Intimate Partner Violence Withdraw Protection Orders

James C. Roberts · Loreen Wolfer · Marie Mele

Published online: 20 February 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

Abstract While reasons for returning to abusive partners have received considerable attention in research on intimate partner violence, few studies have examined the reasons why victims fail to follow through with the protection order process, regardless of whether or not they return to their abusive partners. Fifty-five women who were in the process of withdrawing a protection order against a male intimate partner were surveyed in the present analysis. Recognizing that reasons given for withdrawing a protection order often follow common themes, individual responses were organized into several “domains,” or groupings of such reasons. The most commonly cited domain involved a “concrete change” on behalf of the victim or defendant, which made the protection order less necessary in the victim’s view. This was closely followed by the domain addressing emotional attachment to the abuser. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.

Keywords Intimate partner violence · Domestic violence · Protection order · Restraining order

In the United States, approximately 2 million women are physically assaulted each year by their intimate partners (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Although many women eventually leave abusive partners, their first attempts are

often unsuccessful (Herbert et al. 1991; Campbell et al. 1994). It has been estimated that the average woman makes up to five attempts to leave her abusive partner before she successfully ends the relationship (Okun 1986). Even after ending the relationship, many women still endure threats of physical harm, harassment, and stalking (Wilson et al. 1995; Kurz 1996). Due to the cyclical nature of intimate partner violence, about half of all women who leave an abusive relationship ultimately reunite with their abusive partner (Schutte et al. 1988). Although many women are motivated to end the violence in their lives, their efforts are often hampered by a variety of factors.

The reasons women return to abusive relationships go beyond the simplistic assumption that victims are responsible for their own victimization or that they want to be abused, as suggested by Saul (1972). The difficult process of leaving an abusive relationship typically involves numerous stressors, including: relocation, economic instability, legal actions, child custody issues, disrupted social networks, and termination of emotional connection with the batterer (Martin et al. 2000). Victims often underestimate these difficulties, increasing their risk of returning to abusive partners.

Research suggests that women’s decisions to leave abusive relationships also vary with their perceived level of rewards and costs. For example, Johnson (1992) found that the decision to return to an abusive relationship is guided by a rewards–costs ratio, whereby rewards inside the relationship are perceived to be higher than costs outside the relationship. Specifically, Johnson (1992) found that women are likely to return to the abuser when victims are unemployed, the family income is high, and they have negative perceptions of themselves. These findings are consistent with the principles of exchange theory (Pfouts 1978), which suggest that perceived costs and rewards are

J. C. Roberts (✉) · L. Wolfer
Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice,
University of Scranton,
Scranton, PA, 18510-4605, USA
e-mail: robertsj7@scranton.edu

M. Mele
Department of Criminal Justice, Monmouth University,
West Long Branch, NJ, USA

important concepts in relationship decisions of battered women.

One of the methods that women use in their attempts to escape abusive relationships is a protection (or restraining) order. Among women who report their victimization to the police, about one third obtain a protection order against their abuser (Hathaway et al. 2000). A protection order not only offers victims an avenue for legal action against the abuser; it also gives victims the opportunity to separate themselves from the abuser and take the necessary steps to establish their independence. Many women who apply for a protection order, however, do not follow through with the entire process (Zoellner et al. 2000).

There are a variety of factors that influence women's decisions to follow through with the process to obtain a protection order against their abuser. Zoellner et al. (2000), for example, found that emotional attachment to her partner was an important factor in determining a woman's persistence in the protection order process. Women who reported loving their partner or believing their partner was capable of change were less likely to follow through with the process. Zoellner et al. (2000) also found that a woman's perception of threat was an important predictor in her likelihood of following through with the protection order process. Women whose partners had threatened to kill them were more likely to complete the process than those whose lives had never been threatened. However, those women whose partners made threats against their children were less likely to follow through with the process. Zoellner et al. (2000) concluded that women who are highly fearful of their partners may be deterred from obtaining a protection order due to a realistic fear of retaliation. This conclusion is consistent with previous research, which found that protection orders may increase violence (Baker 1997). And severe fear of one's partner may hinder a woman's ability to seek help from the legal system (DeMaris and Swinford 1996). Fernandez et al. (1997) also found that the severity of abuse was associated with the victim's decision to follow through with the protection order process: the more severe the abuse, the less likely the victim was to follow through with the process. Golding (1999) similarly found that the most severely abused women often suffer from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, which might limit their help-seeking behavior.

Much of the existing research focuses on why women return to abusive relationships. With the exception of those noted here, few studies have focused on why women fail to follow through with the protection order process. The present study sought to address this gap in the literature by surveying women on the reasons why they withdrew a protection order against an abusive partner. The goals of the study were to: (1) determine how battered

women's needs, characteristics, and resources are associated with decisions to withdraw protection orders; and (2) provide insights for more comprehensive strategies aimed at preventing women from returning to abusive relationships.

Methods

The present study took place in Blair County, Pennsylvania, a county of roughly 126,000 people, located in central Pennsylvania. The racial composition of the county is 97% Caucasian, the median household income is \$40,730, and the median age is 40 years. The majority (61%) of county residents who are at least age 25 has a high school education or less, 14% have some college education, and 25% have an associate's degree or more (U.S. Census 2006).

In the state of Pennsylvania, victims of domestic violence can apply for a Protection from Abuse (PFA) order. A PFA is a civil court order that instructs the defendant not to harm or have contact with the plaintiff. A PFA may also prohibit the defendant from having contact with the plaintiff's children or family members. A PFA may be granted to people who are assaulted or threatened by a current or former intimate partner (regardless of whether they reside together), a co-parent, a current or former spouse and any other family member (i.e., parent, sibling, children, etc.).

While every county has a slightly different process for obtaining a PFA, it usually starts with the plaintiff filing a petition with the Court of Common Pleas that describes the abuse they have suffered and the protection they are seeking. Next, an emergency or ex-parte hearing is held, during which time the judge will either grant the plaintiff a temporary PFA and set a date for a final PFA hearing (usually held within 10 days of the initial hearing) or deny the temporary PFA. At the final PFA hearing, a judge decides whether to grant a final order, which lasts up to 18 months and, under certain circumstances, can be extended. At any point in the process, a plaintiff can withdraw his/her request for a PFA by filing a PFA withdrawal order. Once this order is filed, a withdraw petition hearing is held. At this hearing, a judge decides whether to vacate the PFA. If the withdrawal order is granted, the PFA is immediately vacated. A plaintiff can also decide not to seek a final PFA at the final hearing.

Women who were in the process of withdrawing a PFA against a male intimate partner were the focus of the present study. Fifty-nine women were surveyed as they left a final PFA hearing or a withdraw petition hearing. Four of these women had filed PFAs for protection of children only and, therefore, were omitted from the analysis. This left a final sample size of 55 women. Respondents were

surveyed on their reasons for obtaining a PFA and their reasons for withdrawing a PFA. Surveys also included questions on services that may have prevented respondents from failing to complete the PFA process. Prior to their participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the survey, and told that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. Respondents were not compensated for their participation.

All women attending a final PFA hearing or withdraw hearing between July 2005 and January 2006 agreed to participate in the survey. The willingness of these women to participate in the survey may be a reflection of the positive, trusting relationship most had with the victim advocates who administered it. Further, participants in this study were given the option of either an oral administration or written administration of the survey. The oral administration of the survey entailed victim advocates both reading and marking responses to the questions contained within, while the written administration entailed victims reading the questions and marking responses on their own. The vast majority of participants opted to complete the survey on their own in the presence of a victim advocate who was available to answer any questions. Participants were surveyed before leaving the courtroom and out of the presence of abusive partners who were sometimes waiting outside. The survey instrument administered in this study had been developed and used previously by victim advocates from the Blair County Domestic Abuse Project to assess the needs of battered women. The development of this survey was based on insights gained from these advocates' many interactions with victims of abuse, as well as their participation in professional conferences and seminars on intimate partner violence.

As stated previously, most studies focus on why abused women return to their batterers; fewer examine why women withdraw a PFA. It appears that, in the literature, there is an assumption that the same reasons women withdraw PFAs would be the same reasons they return to their batterer. However, this seems to imply that women withdraw PFAs *because* they are returning to their batterer and not for some other reason. Among the limited studies of PFA withdrawal, there does not seem to be the recognition that women may withdraw a PFA because some aspect of the circumstance has concretely changed and that this change would lead them to believe that they no longer needed the protection of a PFA. The survey instrument administered in the present study included 13 different reasons a woman might withdraw a PFA and included a 14th "other" category where women could write in a different response if none of the 13 presented were applicable. Following Johnson's (1992) lead, these individual reasons were organized along

domains. The domains we used and their corresponding individual choices included:

Resources	PFA withdrawn because the victim needs the defendant for food, shelter, healthcare, etc.
Emotional attachment	PFA withdrawn because the defendant promises to change and/or the victim is no longer afraid of the defendant.
Concrete change	PFA withdrawn because the defendant is attending counseling or rehabilitation, the defendant is moving, the victim is moving, and/or the individuals are separating or divorcing.
Family issues	PFA withdrawn because the defendant is missed by the children or the victim is pregnant with the defendant's child.
Bureaucratic issues	PFA withdrawn because the victim failed to appear at the court hearing and/or the victim is dissatisfied with the legal system.

It is important to note here that we treated the defendant's *promise* to change and actually *attending* counseling and rehabilitation as different. A "promise" has no concrete action associated with it; therefore, if the victim accepts it, that acceptance is based on the victim's emotional faith in the defendant. This emotional tie is a common observation noted in the literature. However, a defendant who is actually attending counseling is showing a concrete effort to change behavior.

Results

Almost all of the women surveyed (96%) were White and most (72%) were below the age of 39. Over two-thirds of the women (68%) had one or more children and 69% had a high school education or less. The majority (64%) reported earning less than \$30,000 a year, 6% earned more than \$30,000 a year, and 29% were unemployed (see Table 1).

The most common individual reasons women reported for obtaining a PFA were physical abuse (e.g., pushing, slapping, punching, kicking) and a threat of serious bodily injury made to the plaintiff by the defendant. Two women reported false imprisonment or restraint as the reason they obtained a PFA. Ten women reported other reasons, including: erratic, unpredictable behavior by the defendant, a verbal argument between her and the defendant, pressure from her family, harassment, and wanting to get the defendant "help."

The most common individual reasons women reported for withdrawing a PFA were: (1) the plaintiff was no longer afraid of the defendant (35%); (2) the defendant was attending counseling or some type of treatment program (29%); (3) the defendant promised to change (26%); (4) the defendant was missed by his (or the plaintiff's) children (15%); and (5) the plaintiff needed the defendant for financial reasons (13%). Sixteen women reported withdrawing a PFA for other reasons, including: getting

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of sample and PFA experiences

	%	n
Race		
White	92.8	51
Asian	1.8	1
Other	1.8	1
Age		
19 and younger	3.6	2
20–29	40.0	22
30–39	27.3	15
40–49	20.0	11
50–59	3.6	2
60–69	3.6	2
Number of children		
0	32.7	18
1	21.8	12
2	18.2	10
3	14.5	8
4 or more	9.1	5
Income		
Unemployed	28.8	15
Less than \$5,000	16.4	9
\$10,000	21.8	12
\$15,000	10.9	6
\$20,000	7.3	4
\$30,000	1.8	1
\$35,000	1.8	1
More than \$40,000	3.6	2
Education		
Some high school	10.9	6
High school graduate	56.4	31
Some college	21.8	12
College graduate	7.3	4
Graduate school	1.8	1
Reason obtained PFA		
Physical abuse	58.2	32
Sexual abuse	0	0
Threat of serious bodily injury	40.0	22
False imprisonment, restraint	3.6	2
Other	18.2	10
Individual reason withdrew PFA		
Needed resources of defendant (e.g. money, shelter, insurance, etc).	12.7	7
Defendant promised to change	25.5	14
Defendant attending counseling/rehabilitation	29.1	16
Defendant missed by children	14.5	8
Defendant is moving	3.6	2
Victim is moving	10.9	6
Victim is no longer afraid	34.5	19
Victim failed to appear in court hearing	0	0
Victim is pregnant with defendant's child	7.3	4
Victim dissatisfied with legal system	1.8	1
Parties separating/divorcing	9.1	5
Family illness	0	0
Other	29.1	16
Withdrawal of PFAs—domains		
Resources	12.7	7
Emotional attachment	52.7	29

Table 1 (continued)

	%	n
Concrete change	54.5	30
Family reasons	25.5	14
Bureaucratic	1.8	1
Number of reasons withdrew PFA		
1	63.6	34
2	20.0	11
3	10.9	6
4 or more	5.4	3
Help necessary to prevent PFA withdrawal		
None	89.1	49
Finances	7.3	4
Education/job training	0	0
Job placement	1.8	1
Other	1.8	1

Two respondents had missing information for the question on race, one respondent had missing information for the question on age, and three respondents had missing information for the question on income

married, the desire to resolve the situation without a court order, having a child in common with the defendant, and the desire to “start over again” with the defendant.

The domain most frequently cited as a reason for PFA withdrawal was a concrete change in the situation (55%), followed very closely by emotional reasons (53%). While concrete changes are not frequently discussed in the literature, emotional attachment is; and, in fact, the most common debate is whether emotional or practical reasons for return to the batterer prevail. While our findings support a third reason, that of concrete change, since emotional attachment is a close second, we find more support for that reason for withdrawal than for economic resources. In fact, among our respondents, economic resources was a very distant fourth (13%) reason for withdrawal, preceded by family concerns (26%). Further, while almost two thirds of these respondents only cited one domain (64%), when more than one was cited, the combination of concrete change and emotional attachment was the most frequently cited (14.5% of all respondents, 40% of those who circled more than one domain).

When asked what type of help or assistance could have prevented the respondents from withdrawing the PFA and returning to the defendant, 89% of them reported that there was no assistance that could have prevented them from withdrawing the PFA. Four women reported that help with finances could have prevented them from withdrawing the PFA. One woman reported that help with job placement could have prevented her from withdrawing the PFA.

Discussion

While much research exists on why women return to batterers, there is little on why they withdraw PFAs. The

subtle implication may be that women withdraw PFAs so that they can return to their abusers. However, this overlooks other possible reasons for PFA withdrawal, such as movement to another location (by the batterer or the victim) or family pressure. This research aimed to explore why women withdraw PFAs, and whether the provision of any resources would have prevented this behavior.

Many of the women in the sample were young (below the age of 39), had one or more children, had a high school education or less and either earned less than \$30,000 a year or were unemployed. While previous research suggests that unemployment, low income and low educational attainment are associated with decisions to withdraw protection orders and return to abusive partners, the same conclusions could not be drawn in the present study. Because we did not study those who followed through with the PFA process as a comparison group, we could not determine whether these characteristics were common to those who withdrew PFAs or whether they were common to the general population of women who obtained PFAs in the first place. This is a weakness of the present study that should be addressed in future research.

Recognizing that many individual reasons women may give for withdrawing PFAs center around common themes, we followed the lead of Johnson (1992) and grouped related reasons into what we called “domains”. Among this sample of 55 women, our findings suggest that the most common domain reported for withdrawing a PFA focused on a concrete change on behalf of the victim or defendant that made the PFA less necessary in the victim’s view. These changes involved a victim or defendant moving to another area, separation or divorce between the two parties, and/or the defendant attending counseling or rehabilitation. All of these actions involved either a concrete change in situation (e.g., someone moving), or a concrete, conscientious action on behalf of the defendant to change his behavior (e.g., getting counseling) that lead the victim to no longer feel that the PFA was necessary to protect her. Within the change domain, the defendant attending counseling or rehabilitation was the individual reason most frequently mentioned (29.1% of the respondents), thereby suggesting a faith in the success of batterer intervention programs or counseling. Interestingly, this concept of “change” is not an issue commonly recognized in the research. However, because the sample in this study is limited for the previously stated reasons, the finding merits more thorough analysis in future research.

A very close second to the change domain was the emotional attachment domain, which *is* frequently mentioned in the literature. Reasons for PFA withdrawal that illustrated emotional attachment included removing the PFA because the victim no longer feared the respondent or because the defendant “promised” to change (as opposed

to the defendant taking a concrete action towards change such as actually attending counseling or rehabilitation). In this domain, the most frequent individual element was the victim’s claim that she no longer feared the defendant (34.5% of all responses), which incidentally was the most frequently cited individual (not domain) reason given for PFA withdrawal, as well.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, among this sample of women, concrete change (especially the defendant actually attending counseling or rehabilitation) and emotional attachment (especially no longer fearing the defendant) interacted to create a push/pull relationship between the offender and victim where the victim’s faith in programs aimed at helping batterers overcome their abusive behavior and the victim’s emotional attachment to the offender lead the victim to no longer feel that the PFA was necessary. Because our research is exploratory, future work may shed important insight on this push/pull relationship, especially as it applies to victims’ faith in batterer intervention programs.

It is well documented in the available research that fear and attachment significantly influence a victim’s decision not only to leave, but also to return to abusive partners. According to Dutton and Painter’s (1993) conceptualization of traumatic bonding theory, while fear may propel women to leave abusive partners, strong emotional attachment formed by power influences and intermittent good–bad treatment may cause them to return. Based on our findings, this same reasoning seems to apply to decisions to obtain, and then later withdraw, PFAs. A similar conclusion regarding the link between traumatic bonding theory and attachment to abusive partners has been reached in at least two other studies of protection orders (see Malecha et al. 2003; Zoellner et al. 2000).

However, what is less clear in the literature is the effectiveness of batterer intervention programs. There is currently considerable debate within the available research on intimate partner violence as to whether such faith in batterers or batterer treatment programs is warranted. Despite numerous evaluations suggesting that batterer treatment programs work for at least some individuals, the number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies is small and more methodologically rigorous studies are needed (Davis and Taylor 1999).

This relates to the second goal of this exploration, determining what resources may have prevented women from withdrawing PFAs. In the literature, there is currently a debate as to whether women return to abusers because of emotional attachment or whether they return because they lack various resources (such as money, shelter, etc.) that an abuser may possess. Our results indicate that, overwhelmingly, the women in this sample did not feel that the provision of resources would have altered their decision to

withdraw the PFA. In addition, among this sample, the resource domain was not a very salient reason why these women withdrew their PFAs. If the earlier conclusion is correct, that these women placed faith in the ability of counseling and rehabilitation to change the behaviors of batterers, and that this faith was related to the emotional attachment they had to their batterers, then given the questionable statistical support for these programs, it may be that the best resource we can give these women is information regarding the programs' questionable effectiveness. On the other hand, if emotional attachment really is a salient explanation, cautions about the effectiveness of batterer intervention programs may go unheeded. This clearly needs greater exploration in future research.

While the present study was not without limitations, most notably our failure to include a comparison group of individuals who followed through with the PFA process, the results offer important insights for future research and should be viewed as a preliminary step towards a more comprehensive understanding of factors associated with PFA withdrawal. As suggested by Zoellner et al. (2000), "Future research should further refine the conceptualization and measurement of these factors so that we can begin to understand how they influence help-seeking behavior, and indirectly, violence" (p. 1095). Most notably, there is still much disagreement in the available research as to what constitutes "attachment" as it relates to abusive relationships (Griffing et al. 2002). In addition to reconceptualizing individual factors related to PFA withdrawal and victims' return to abusers, future research should further explore groupings of such factors. Specifically, we urge future researchers to consider the domain "concrete change" as a reason for withdrawing PFAs, as it has not been considered in the available research to date and may hold valuable insights into victims' decisions to follow through with the PFA process.

Finally, it should be noted that there is great need for more extensive studies of the PFA process in general, as much of the available research focuses on reasons for returning to abusers and does not necessarily examine reasons for withdrawing PFAs. A study that follows individuals who have applied, withdrawn, and then later reapplied for PFAs would be informative and may shed light on whether any misplaced faith in batterers or batterer treatment programs contributed to the second PFA request. In addition, it is still unclear what characteristics, if any, individuals who withdraw PFAs share with those who follow through with the process. It is our hope that knowledge gained through such studies will aid researchers and policy makers in developing comprehensive strategies for protecting battered women. In the meantime, researchers and advocates should make a concerted effort to share their

knowledge with victims of abuse. Specifically, victims should be presented with realistic expectations for batterer change and batterer treatment programs. They should also be made aware of the emotional attachment to batterers that lingers with many victims long after the abuse has stopped, as this attachment may cause some individuals to return to abusive relationships after their initial fears subside and positive memories of the abuser return (Dutton and Painter 1993). Armed with this information, victims may be more capable of making informed decisions when deciding whether to withdraw a PFA and/or return to an abusive relationship.

References

- Baker, P. L. (1997). And I went back: Battered women's negotiation of choice. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 26(1), 55–74.
- Campbell, J. C., Miller, P., Cardwell, M. M., & Belknap, R. A. (1994). Relationship status of battered women over time. *Journal of Family Violence*, 9, 99–111.
- Davis, R. C., & Taylor, B. G. (1999). Does batterer treatment reduce violence? A synthesis of the literature. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 10(2), 69–93.
- DeMaris, A., & Swinford, S. (1996). Female victims of spousal violence: Factors influencing their level of fearfulness. *Family Relations*, 45, 98–106.
- Dutton, D. G., & Painter, S. (1993). Emotional attachments in abusive relationships: A test of traumatic bonding theory. *Violence and Victims*, 8(2), 105–120.
- Fernandez, M., Iwamoto, K., & Muscat, B. (1997). Dependency and severity of abuse: Impact on women's persistence in utilizing the court system as protection against domestic violence. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 9(1), 39–62.
- Golding, J. (1999). Intimate partner violence as a risk factor for mental disorders: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Violence*, 14, 99–132.
- Griffing, S., Ragin, D. F., Sage, R. E., Madry, L., Bingham, L. E., & Primm, B. J. (2002). Domestic violence survivors' self-identified reasons for returning to abusive relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 17(3), 306–319.
- Hathaway, J. E., Mucci, L. A., Silverman, J. G., Brooks, D. R., Matthews, R., & Pavlos, C. A. (2000). Health status and health care use of Massachusetts women reporting partner abuse. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 19(4), 302–307.
- Herbert, T. B., Silver, R. C., & Ellard, J. H. (1991). Coping with an abusive relationship: How and why do women stay. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53, 311–325.
- Johnson, I. M. (1992). Economic, situational, and psychological correlates of the decision-making process of battered women. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 73, 168–176.
- Kurz, D. (1996). Separation, divorce and woman abuse. *Violence Against Women*, 2(1), 63–81.
- Malecha, A., McFarlane, J., Gist, J., Watson, K., Batten, E., Hall, I., et al. (2003). Applying for and dropping a protection order: A study with 150 women. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 14(4), 486–504.
- Martin, A. J., Berenson, K. B., Griffing, S., Sage, R. E., Madry, L., Bingham, L. E., et al. (2000). The process of leaving an abusive

- relationship: The role of risk assessments and decision-certainty. *Journal of Family Violence*, 15(2), 109–122.
- Okun, L. E. (1986). *Woman abuse: Facts replacing myths*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pfouts, J. (1978). Violent families: Coping responses of abused wives. *Child Welfare*, 57, 101–111.
- Saul, L. (1972). Personal and social psychopathology and the primary prevention of violence. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 128, 1578–1581.
- Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., & Doyle, J. S. (1988). The relationship between the characteristics of the victim, persuasive techniques of the batterer, and returning to a battered relationship. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 128, 605–610.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Extent, nature and consequences of intimate partner violence: Findings from the national violence against women survey*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- U.S. Bureau of Census. <http://www.census.gov>. Accessed on February 11, 2008.
- Wilson, M., Johnson, H., & Daly, M. (1995). Lethal and non-lethal violence against wives. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 37(3), 331–361.
- Zoellner, L. A., Feeny, N. C., Alvarez, J., Watlington, C., O'Neill, M. L., Zager, R., et al. (2000). Factors associated with completion of the restraining order process in female victims of partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 15(10), 1081–1099.