

## Women's Experiences with Battering: A Conceptualization from Qualitative Research

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Battering of women by their male partners affects an estimated 3 -4 million women each year in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Prevalence studies indicate that between one-third and one-fifth of all women will be physically assaulted by a male partner.<sup>2</sup> Battering generally consists of men's continuous use of physical, and often sexual, assaults along with verbally and emotionally abusive behaviors that may become more severe and damaging over time. In addition to assaulting their partners, batterers also threaten, intimidate, and humiliate them; isolate them from family and friends; restrict their access to money and other resources; threaten the safety of children and others in their families; and control their activities outside the home.<sup>3</sup> Sex is also a weapon batterers use to gain power over their partners; this manifests itself as both rape and withholding sexual affection.<sup>4</sup> Evidence is growing that the physical, psychological, and sexual violence battered women are subjected to contributes to the development of many serious health problems including injury, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, substance abuse, suicide, and homicide.<sup>5-16</sup>

In growing appreciation of the complex pattern of violent behaviors that battering comprises, some scholars are now beginning to distinguish the phenomena of battering from acute acts of physical assault.<sup>14,17-22</sup> Battering is increasingly understood to be a chronic, continuous experience, with more attention being given to battered women's sense of fear and disempowerment, or the process of losing power. Battering has been usefully defined by Flitcraft<sup>20</sup> as a syndrome<sup>20</sup> as a syndrome of control and entrapment that accompanies the use of physical force in intimate relationships. Although both men and women are known to use physical assault as a way of resolving conflict in intimate adult relationships, 95% of the victims of battering are women.<sup>20</sup> The violent assaultive behavior of batterers is recognized as occurring in the context of continuous intimidation and coercion, and to be an enduring condition rather than a set of discrete events.<sup>17,21,22</sup> A number of researchers have commented on the continuous nature of battering and offered different conceptualizations of it. Ferraro and Johnson's<sup>18</sup> qualitative research with battered women revealed a process of victimization that is "not synonymous with experiencing violent attacks from a spouse" (p. 336). Their research suggests that battering has "an emotional career" that includes changes women undergo in violent relationships and women's subjective perceptions of their experiences. Avni's<sup>19</sup> phenomenological research points to how important the private nature of violence is. She compares living in a battering relationship to living a "total institution," a conceptualization usually associated with structures such as prisons, mental institutions, army camps, and monasteries. But this concept refers more generally to institutions that place physical barriers between those within and outside them. Living in the total institution of battering shapes and sustains the women's experiences with themselves and their batterers. The women go through a process of shame, loss of self-respect, damage to the self, diminished ability to cope as a free adult, and a distancing between self and sources of help and support.

Despite such characterizations of battering as those reviewed above, our usual way of conceptualizing violence against women by their male partners still focuses largely on the incidence, frequency, and severity of acts of physical assault.<sup>23-21</sup> Although this method of determining the tactics batterers use can provide us with information on how many times a woman was hit, it tells us little about the character of the experience, its meaning to the woman, how it pervades their life experiences, about the relationships between assault, power,

or about the social meaning of the incidents.<sup>21 28</sup> The exclusive focus on the behavioral features of battering, to the exclusion of women's experiences and perceptions, fails to capture both the continuous presence of battering in women's lives and the meaning of the violence to women.<sup>17,18,22</sup> We are left with a body of knowledge that is, in large part, shaped by the behavioral features of battering without contribution and back from its experiential character. Consequently, we have only a partial understanding of the phenomenon of battering. A focus on women's experiences provides new ways of studying how battering affects women's health and behavior.<sup>22</sup> The present study's purpose was to investigate the meanings and intentions that battered women attach to the physical and psychological violence they endure and' from these meanings, develop a conceptual framework that more completely and accurately describes women's experience with being battered.

## METHODS

Focus methodology was chosen for this study because it allowed collection of in-depth qualitative data about both women's experiences with being battered and the feelings and meanings they associate with these experiences. Five focus groups were conducted with 22 battered women identified by the staff of five programs for battered women in North Carolina. The programs were chosen to represent geographic and racial diversity in North Carolina. Seventy-three percent of the women were white, 27% were African- American, and they ranged in age between 20 and 49. Most had an annual income of under \$15,000 and had completed high school. Eighty-percent of the women had only one abusive partner, and the majority of the abusers were husbands rather than boyfriends. The sample was divided equally among those who were battered fewer than 5 years, between 6 and 10 years, and between 11 and 30 years.

The focus groups were tape-recorded and notes taken so that the women's exact phrases and descriptions could be examined qualitatively. One of us (PHS) moderated all five focus groups while a research assistant took notes during the groups and operated the recording equipment. Staff members of the domestic violence programs were not present during these groups and did not have access to the audio-recordings or the transcriptions. The groups lasted an average of 2 1/2 hours each.

The data were collected and analyzed from the perspective of empirical phenomenology.<sup>29,30</sup> This method is inductive and investigates how things appear to people prior to the development of theory, constructs, measurement, and data analysis. Because this method is essentially concerned with studying participants' worlds as they themselves see those worlds, the interviews were deliberately unstructured. Instead of responding to a predetermined set of questions, the women were asked to talk with each other, not the moderator, about their experiences with being battered. The moderator sat outside the circle of women and interrupted the conversation only rarely.

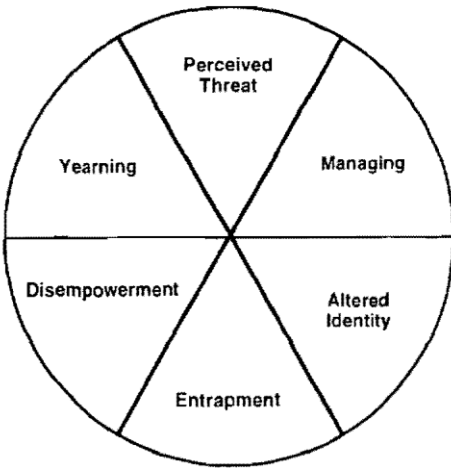
The focus groups resulted in 400 pages of transcribed text that was then entered into Ethnograph, a text analysis software package for microcomputers.<sup>31</sup> Two of the authors (PHS, IT) collaborated on the iterative phenomenological analysis of the data. This process involved reading and rereading the text to uncover patterns that emerged from the data rather than coding the data using predetermined concepts. Two principles guided the analysis: what must be subjectively apprehended about an individual experience in order to classify it as one of battering<sup>32</sup> and conceptualizing battering as a chronic experience not necessarily synonymous with being assaulted by a partner.<sup>18</sup> This meant that the analysis proceeded from the perspective of the battered women's everyday experiences living with an abusive partner rather than in terms of the men's behavior.

## RESULTS

The patterns that emerged reveal battering to be an enduring, traumatic, and multidimensional experience that is manifested in women's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Six domains emerged from the analysis of women's experiences with being battered. A framework we called the Women's Experiences with Battering (WEB) Framework (Figure 1, Table 1) comprises these domains. The six domains are as follows: perceived threat, altered identity, managing, entrapment, yearning, and disempowerment.

### *Perceived Threat*

This domain reflects battered women's emotional and cognitive reactions to the environment created by their partners' use of violence. It also reflects the women's perceptions of their susceptibility to being harmed in the future by their male partners, the uncontrollability of the risk, and the feelings of dread their partners invoke in them. The following women's words illustrate this perception of threat:



*Figure 1. Women's experiences with male battering: WEB Framework.*

Well, in my situation there was a lot of fear. I went to bed afraid, and I woke up afraid the whole day through. Not knowing what he'd do, what he'd say. His reaction always had me 'fendful' and there was always a lot of fear. I just don't think a woman wants to live that way.

. . . And it's like he's the only person in my life today that I can't stand up to. That I've still got this fear and he's still got this hold on me that I cannot just stand up and say, "You're an asshole; I hate your fucking guts!" You know that I wanna say that so bad, but I can't. I clam up. I think, "When is this going to evolve? When am I going to feel comfortable?" That knot in my stomach when I know he's in the same room. That knot just gets right there because I was accused of everything imaginable, and how lie would never

**Table 1. WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MALE BATTERING (WEB) FRAMEWORK: DIMENSIONS AND DEFINITIONS**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Perceived threat	Women's emotional (fear) and cognitive (danger) reactions to their environment; it reflects women's perception of susceptibility to future harm, the severity of the risk, the distribution of the risk, the controllability of the risk and of their emotions in response to the event, and feelings of dread invoked by the risk
Managing	Women's assessment of their situations as harmful or not, followed by some form of direct action, inhibition of action, or intrapsychic coping behavior
Yearning	Women's efforts (often futile) to establish intimacy with their partners that stem from the detachment they often feel from their partners
Altered identity	Women's changing self-concept and loss of self attendant upon the battering relationship
Entrapment	Women's perceptions of being trapped in the relationship
Disempowerment	Women's routine existence and the loss of power that occurs with sustained battering as their thoughts and behaviors become habitually modified in accordance with the batterers' desires.

give me time to explain anything. It was always his tongue lashings. I was a yes person. And I couldn't argue or fight back because of the kids. I hated that. They would be sitting in there screaming, "Stop, stop, stop!" And I would be saying, "Dear God, please stop, please stop; wait 'til the kids are asleep. Don't do this to me while they're in there and watching."

### *Managing*

This second domain represents battered women's assessment of how harmful their lives with their partners are, together with some form of direct or intrapsychic coping behavior. Once these women perceive their environments as harmful or stressful, they further assess the extent of the harm, loss, threat, or challenge they face. This assessment leads to cognitive or behavioral coping. This dimension also reflects the control women believe they have over whether or not their partners assault them.

You know that if you piss them off, that you've got hell to pay, and it's just not worth it. It's not worth it. I mean, you do whatever they say just to keep the peace. You know, I mean, I can't believe the things I've done just out of fear that somebody is going to do what he said he was going to do. . . . And I, I put my marriage and my child and my life at risk to try to keep somebody appeased.

There was no way to tell what was going to happen because most of our arguments were not about anything serious. . . It was like, "You got the wrong kind of bread!" or "I don't like that kind of candy bar!" "Oh, you got the wrong beer!" And then I'd get beat for that and all night long, so I got to the point when I would go to the grocery store, if I wasn't sure about what to get him, I would call home, "Now what kinda coffee was that you wanted?" You know? Oh, especially if they didn't have what he asked for, and you had to pick something else. I was like this; my hands are still shaking.

### *Altered Identity*

This third domain reflects the change in women's self-concept and the loss of self that accompanies continuous exposure to physical and psychological violence. Battered women's identities are transformed by the negative images of themselves batterers reflect back to them. Altered identity is illustrated by these words:

I mean, we are at their mercy, and they know they can use the money and the finances over us. It's also the emotional abuse most of the time. Everything he would say to me would be negative and would break my own self-will to the point that after a while I believed him. I believed he was right. I wasn't any good, didn't do anything right, and I had to ask him what to do because at that period of time I didn't know what was right.

I was accused, there was never any trust in our marriage. . . . God, maybe I am a slut; maybe I am a whore. I felt like a slut and a whore within our own sexual things. I was raped by my husband over and over. I can remember one instance: my youhgest was conceived out of rape. Out of assault on me.

Woman 1: "Just took away your identity. Who you are and what you want to be." Woman 2: "Yeah, absolutely. I had none. When I left, he would say, 'So how do you feel about this?' What do you mean, 'How do I feel about this?'" Woman 3: "Of course. What are feelings? You gave up feelings."

Woman 1 "Yeah, what kind of question is that? I don't feel. I just react." Woman 1: "You just react. I didn't even know who I was, you know."

### *Entrapment*

The fourth domain reflects battered women's perceptions of being trapped in the relationships. This entrapment results from batterers' efforts to keep women in the relationships, from the privacy of the violence, and from women's perceptions that help and support are unavailable.

Mine was fear and misery 'cause everyday he'd put fear in me 'cause he'd always threaten me saying that if I decided to ever leave that he'd hunt me down like a dog and shoot me and the girls. And he knew I had nowhere to go, so I just had to stay there and put up with it,

When I came here [to the shelter] I was even afraid to talk about it 'cause was told for 14 years, "You don't say nothing to nobody." And even the girls, he threatened the girls, "If you tell anybody such and such, or that daddy beats mama, daddy's gonna get ya." And I was scared to talk. And my girls too.

### *Yearning*

The fifth domain represents battered women's desires and efforts to establish intimacy with their partners. Although these women's efforts are not unlike those of couples that live in violence-free relationships striving to develop closeness, these women's efforts take on an aura of desperateness by virtue of their partners' inconsistent reciprocity and the violence the men use. This "yearning" stems from the combination of the women's romantic love for their partners and the men's emotional detachment, which results in a less intimate relationship than the women would like. This aspect of battered women's experience is perhaps also fostered by the men's promises to change their behavior and their gestures of intimacy after episodes of physical assault. As the women stated:

I had this concept: If I loved him enough and I just gave him my all and was everything he wanted me to be, that he would, he, finally he, would love me.

. . . You never felt any kind of connectedness to him, you know, but you wanted it so bad, . . . and I think that's why you kept on doin' things, to try to make things right. You always hoped, you know, "Well if I keep the house clean, cook, clean, and keep the clothes cleaned up and, you know, do all this stuff, then it's gonna be better, and this is what he wants me to do." ... But that wasn't what he wanted cause it never happened. He never connected; . . . I always felt detached. No matter how hard I tried. He would never, he wouldn't let me in. But he

wanted me to do all these things, and if everything was inside of me, I'd give my soul up to him but he wouldn't give anything to me.

I want someone to put their arms around me and tell me I'm gonna be okay, And I can't get it from my kids. And all I can remember is, I remember the days I got it from him.

### *Disempowerment*

This last domain speaks to the women's routine existences and to the loss of power that occurs with sustained exposure to battering as their thoughts and behaviors become habitually modified in accordance with the batterers' desires. This first excerpt is a dialogue among four women.

Woman 1: "You know, it's like we're running from our parents who told us what to do, to our husbands who told us what to do."

Woman 2: "I know they're constantly telling, sooner or later, you get the message, and then they'll work on something else. It's constant!" Women 1: "Cause if you don't do what they want you to do, you get punished."

Woman 3: "I know you do, That's what programming is."

Woman 4: "Umhmm, the punishment."

Woman 2: "Just over and over."

My husband used to argue everyday, soon as he walked in the door from work. Everyday. Everyday. The kids even knew. I tell them, "Look y'all better go ahead and have some fun, cause you know that 'round 'bout 4:30. . ., and they, they know it, 'bout the time daddy come home. And they would do it, they would go outside and play, and when they see that car comin' they go right in the house, right to their rooms. That's how scared they were. And I sit in the chair, and I wait.

### INTEGRATION ACROSS DOMAINS

To understand battering fully, we need to appreciate the interrelationships among the six domains in the WEB Framework. As the following battered woman's statement reveals, the experiences represented by the domains co exist in the lives of battered women: "It's fear and terror. Loss of self- confidence. Made to feel like shit. That you're unworthy of anything. That you're useless." These six domains should be viewed, therefore, as integrated components of the unitary WEB Framework rather than as empirically distinct. For example, women's fear of their partners may lead them to assess their situations as harmful and, in response, to a pattern of survival coping behavior. This behavior, in interaction with continuous exposure to psychological degradation, may result in an altered self-concept. Such an alteration, in turn, deepens these women's feelings of being trapped. The following three text excerpts illustrate how these domains are integrated. This first one illustrates the connection between feeling at risk of future harm (perceived threat) and behavior designed to manage or cope with this risk (managing):

And I, I tried at all costs to keep away from [him], if I could feel that he was getting uptight or tense or whatever. I would try to steer away from, some times it, it meant keeping my mouth shut when I was dying to say what was on my mind because I'm not one to hold back what's on my mind. But a lot of times, I had to. Just to him from seeing red.

This second excerpt illustrates the relationship between habitual coping behavior (managing) and a changing self-concept (altered identity):

if I told him I loved him when I was wanting to slit his throat, that I would never leave him when I was wanting to walk out that door, if he fed him what he wanted to hear, there was good times. But it got to where I couldn't even, it got to where I hated myself so much for not being up front and telling this man how I felt, but I couldn't. I just clammed up and was either crying or sleeping.

This third excerpt shows the relationship between a changing self identity) and feeling trapped by secrecy and isolation (entrapment):

I mean, when you took away the makeup and the clothes and everything I was still th ugly person underneath it all, and I was certainly ugly on the inside. I knew that, I knew that if anybody ever knew the truth about mc, they were gonna know that I was this really worthless piece of garbage, and he was intelligent, he was from a good family. . .

## DISCUSSION

The voice these women give to their experiences stands in contrast to our current conceptualization of battering as intentional physical assault. These women's experiences result from being in an intimate relationship with a male partner who directs psychological, and perhaps sexual, abuse as well as physical assault toward them. The WEB Framework represents, in essence, the experiential features of battering. Such a conceptualization supplements our knowledge of battering previously shaped by our understanding of its behavioral features, or the tactics used by batterers. Our experiential perspective suggests, as other researchers have found, that battering is not equivalent to physical assault;<sup>17-22</sup> Instead, the conceptualization of battering presented here reveals it to be an enduring, chronic, traumatic experience that shapes women's behavior, distorts their view of self, and undermines their belief in the controllability of their own lives (see Table 2).

Although assault is important and indisputably causes injury, it is reasonable to expect that living in an environment that causes women to have a continual perception of terror, a continuous loss of power, and a shrinking self-concept has equally or more severe long-lasting mental, medical, and behavioral consequences for women as does being physically assaulted. Male battering is a complex exposure that places women in a prolonged state of stress, and the assaults coupled with women's attempts to cope with the stress and violence may result in many of the health problems seen in battered women.<sup>22</sup> The multidimensional WEB Framework provides a way of systematically analyzing and understanding battering and its relationships to women's health status and behavior.

Some of these domains of experience, however, may also occur in other kinds of traumatic experiences. For example, research with children victimized by sexual abuse reveals that they also experience disempowerment.<sup>33</sup> These six WEB domains also contain within them cognitive, affective, and behavioral expressions that are not unique to battered women. For example, it is not unusual or unexpected for people to feel at risk when threatened or to engage in behaviors to minimize the threat or the stress caused by threat.<sup>34</sup> What makes battering unique is the occurrence of these domains of experience in women facing a particular set of circumstances defined by their partners' use of physical and nonphysical violence in attempts to gain and maintain power and control over them. These domains reflect a woman's experi-

**Table 2. FEATURES OF BATTERING**

<i>Conceptual Features</i>	<i>Behavioral Features</i>	<i>Experiential Features (WEB Framework)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not synonymous with physical assault</li> <li>● Enduring condition, not discrete events</li> <li>● Chronic, not acute</li> <li>● Traumatic</li> <li>● Process of control and entrapment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical assault</li> <li>● Threats and intimidation</li> <li>● Humiliation and degradation</li> <li>● Rape and withholding of sexual affection</li> <li>● Isolation</li> <li>● Restriction of money and access to resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perceived threat</li> <li>● Managing</li> <li>● Yearning</li> <li>● Altered identity</li> <li>● Disempowerment</li> <li>● Entrapment</li> </ul>

ence in interaction with her partner. For example, she feels afraid because of the way he treats her, and because he scares her, she alters her behavior to avoid his violence or minimize his violent behavior. The occurrence of these six domains of experience in this context distinguishes battering from other acute or chronic traumas, such as stranger or acquaintance rape, child sexual abuse, stranger assault, and even from assault by an intimate partner, if assault occurs only once or outside the context of the perpetrator's attempts to dominate and control the other. Additionally, however, battered women's experiences are likely to reflect the interactions they have with other people and institutions around the battering. Battered women who have sought help and been met with inadequate resources and responses may, for example, feel more trapped and disempowered.

Our increasing awareness of the health effects of battering has led to numerous efforts to encourage the medical and public health communities to provide more training and protocols for health professionals to help them recognize battering and provide effective services to battered women seeking medical care.<sup>27, 35, 36</sup> Although medical expertise is a critical aspect of our social response to battered women, the focus on women's experience with male battering presented here suggests that to intervene effectively we also need to look beyond the more formal system of medical care for solutions. The WEB Framework suggests the need for a broad range of medical, public health, and criminal justice interventions that penetrate battered women's isolation, disrupt the disempowerment process, and challenge their altered negative identity. The WEB Framework provides a useful starting point for helping to consider steps that may change the conditions of fear, silence, and neglect that entrap battered women in violent relationships.

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