

## **The Impact of Specific Battering Experiences on the Self-Esteem of Abused Women**

**Rudy J. Aguilar<sup>1</sup> and Narina Nunez Nightingale<sup>1</sup>**

---

*This study examined the self-esteem of 48 women who were identified as battered and compared them to a group of 48 nonbattered women. As expected, the group of battered women experienced lower self-esteem than the nonbattered women. Four clusters of battering experiences were also identified: Physical Abuse, Emotional/Controlling Abuse, Sexual/Emotional Abuse, and Miscellaneous Abuse. Analyses indicated that Emotional/Controlling abuse was the only abuse cluster that was significantly related to lower self-esteem. The findings suggest that abuse that is controlling in nature might play a significant role in the feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness noted in battered women and may contribute to the difficulty that some battered women have in terminating their abusive relationships.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** battered women; self-esteem; physical abuse; emotional abuse; sexual abuse.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Low esteem has been recognized by many as a common characteristic of women in abusive relationships (e.g., Mitchell and Hodson, 1983; Walker, 1979). Battered women are often described as having very low self-esteem and as feeling powerless to change their situation. Whether women of low self-esteem are likely targets for battering relationships or that battering relationships cause low self-esteem is not entirely clear. What is apparent, however, is that low self-esteem (whatever the cause) may contribute to the difficulty many women have in leaving battering relationships. Terminating a battering relationship requires many situational and psychological changes that may be more difficult for women that have low

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

opinions of themselves. Thus, many investigators have sought to gain a more precise understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and battering relationships. For example, Hudson and MacIntosh (1981) found that low self-esteem was related to an increased probability of wife assault. Additionally, Mitchell and Hodson (1983) found that women in physically violent relationships were characterized by higher rates of depression and lower self-esteem than women with non-abusive partners. Finally, some have attempted to establish a link between self-esteem, abuse, and other related factors such as gender identity and acceptance of aggression (Burke *et al.*, 1988). Overall, the association between abuse and self-esteem appears to be well-documented; increased abuse is related to lowered self-esteem. What has not been extensively considered in prior research is the possibility that different types of abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, sexual) might have varying effects on the self-esteem of battered women. The present investigation examined the self-esteem of battered and nonbattered women and sought to determine which battering experiences were particularly correlated with low self-esteem.

Physical abuse and its effect on women has been the subject of numerous investigations. As early as 1979 there was the suggestion that exposure to violence within a battering relationship produced a cognitive set resembling learned helplessness (Walker, 1979). Others have noted that this type of mental environment often is associated with lowered self-esteem, increased depression and poorer coping skills (Mitchell and Hodson, 1983). Research with battered women has revealed that physically abused women perceive their lives as more controlled by external factors (Browne, 1986; Finn, 1986; Pagelow, 1984) and that psychological symptoms appear to be directly related to the predictability of the physical abuse (Follingstad *et al.*, 1991). In summary, there is consensus among researchers and clinicians who have worked with physically abused women that there are psychological consequences (e.g., lower self-esteem) associated with physical abuse.

While the effects of physical abuse on the victim have received attention, less is known about how emotional abuse affects an individual. However, several investigations have suggested that emotional abuse also has a significant impact on mental health. For example, Feraro (1979) found that experiencing emotional psychological forms of abuse, such as fear and humiliation, contributed to long-term detrimental effects on women's self-esteem. More recently, several investigations have found that battered women describe emotional abuse to be one of the more distressing aspects of their relationships (Follingstad *et al.*, 1990; Walker, 1984). Follingstad *et al.* (1990) observed that emotional abuse that included ridicule (e.g., name-calling, verbal harassment) was rated as the worst type of emotional abuse among physically and emotionally abused women.

Emotional abuse that was restricting and controlling (e.g., being told who they can see, being denied access to their finances) also had a negative impact on women that experienced this type of abuse. Additionally, most of the women in that study reported that emotional abuse had more debilitating effects than the physical abuse that they experienced (Follingstad *et al.*, 1990). Thus, it seems that emotional abuse, which often accompanies physical violence, might be particularly detrimental to self-esteem and psychological well-being.

The purpose of the present investigation was to examine self-esteem of battered and nonbattered women and to determine if some battering experiences were more related to low self-esteem than others. Specifically, the self-esteem of a group of battered women was compared to the self-esteem of a group of nonbattered women. The group of battered women was then examined more closely in order to determine which battering experiences might be related to low self-esteem. That is, specific clusters of battering experiences were to be identified and the relationship between these clusters and self-esteem was examined. It was expected that, as a group, the battered women would have lower self-esteem scores than the group of nonbattered women. Further, it was expected that the women in the battered group would not be homogeneous in their experiences (e.g., some women would have experienced predominantly physical abuse while other women would have experienced a high degree of emotional abuse in their battering relationships) or their levels of self-esteem. Based on previous work (e.g., Follingstad *et al.*, 1990) it was anticipated that women who experience high degrees of emotional abuse would have particularly low self-esteem scores, especially when that emotional abuse was of a controlling nature (i.e., when their spouses/boyfriends placed high levels of controls on their lives).

## METHODS

### Subjects

The experimental group (Battered Group) consisted of women who have sought assistance through various family violence and sexual assault programs and who have identified themselves as experiencing battering by a husband or lover ( $n = 49$ ). The mean age for the group was 32.5 ( $SD = 14.35$ ). As expected, the group of 49 women were not homogenous in their battering experiences. As can be seen in Table I, 29% had been abused more than one year ago while the majority (71%) had experienced battering within the past year. Of those women experiencing abuse within the past year, over half of them (19) were currently involved in a relationship

Table I. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample of Battered Women

		Time Since Last Abuse	
		Within past year	More than 1 year ago
Currently in a Relationship with the Abuser			
No	<i>N</i> (%)	15 (31)	14 (29)
Sample age	<i>M</i> (SD)	28.14 (6.70)	32.50 (14.35)
Yes	<i>N</i> (%)	19 (40)	0
Sample age	<i>M</i> (SD)	31.55 (7.30)	—

with an abuser. Mean ages and standard deviations of the sample are presented in Table I.

A comparison group of 49 women (Nonbattered Group) was randomly selected from the general university population and the community at large. The mean age for the comparison group was 32 (SD = 8.28).

### Measures and Procedures

A comprehensive questionnaire was developed in order to assess self-esteem and to determine the various types of battering behaviors that the women may have experienced. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section 1 was comprised of the Barksdale Self-esteem Evaluation (Barksdale, 1972) which calculates an individual self-esteem score (SEI). The scores on this evaluation can range from a low SEI of -75 to a high SEI score of +75.

Section 2 of the questionnaire consisted of questions concerning the types of battering experiences that women may have encountered. Participants were asked to answer "yes" or "no" to questions about their boyfriend/husband such as "Have you been hit with a fist?" and "Have you been told you were stupid?". The questions in Section 2 were devised to provide a basis for examining the possibility that certain battering behaviors might co-occur and that they may be differentially related to self-esteem. Three items on the questionnaire were excluded from the analysis because of low frequency; only one individual indicated that she had experienced those behaviors and was excluded from any further analyses. The three items were: (1) Have you ever been shot?, (2) Have you ever been burned?, (3) Have you ever been stabbed?.

A validity check was employed to ensure that the group of Nonbattered women were not also victims of abuse. Endorsement of any *one* of the 12 questions directly addressing physical forms of abuse found in section 2 of the questionnaire was used as criteria for classifying a subject as being battered. Additionally, endorsement of any *two* of the remaining 10 questions addressing emotional/controlling and sexual/controlling forms of abuse were also used as criteria for classifying subjects as being battered. One woman from the comparison group endorsed more than one item related to physical abuse within the past year and also identified herself as being currently involved in a battering relationship. Thus, she was excluded from further analyses. It should be noted that all of the women from the Battered group met the validity check criteria. Therefore, we felt confident that the Battered and the Nonbattered women differed significantly in their battering experiences.

Questionnaires were administered anonymously to both the Battered and Nonbattered groups of women. Staff members at various family violence programs administered the questionnaires to the group of Battered women. Questionnaires were administered to the Nonbattered group by various university instructors, counselors, and by the first author.

## RESULTS

To examine the difference between Battered and Nonbattered women's self-esteem, an Analysis of Variance was performed. The analysis revealed a significant group difference ( $F(1,96) = 36.81, p = .001$ ). As expected, Battered women had significantly lower self-esteem index scores ( $\bar{X} = 4.04, SD = 18.90$ ) than Nonbattered women ( $\bar{X} = 28.29, SD = 20.62$ ).

Additional *t*-test were performed to determine if group differences in SEI scores existed for the different types of battered women (i.e., women abused over one year ago, women abused within the past year who were currently involved in an abusive relationship and women abused within the past year not currently involved in an abusive relationship). Analyses indicated no significant differences in SEI scores between the group of women abused within the past year/currently involved in an abusive relationship and the group of women abused within the past year/not currently involved in an abusive relationship. Significant differences were found between the group of women abused over one year ago and the group of women abused within the past year/currently involved in an abusive relationship ( $t(27) = 2.89; p < .01$ ). Significant group differences were also found between the group of women abused over one year ago and the group of women abused within the past year/not currently involved in an abusive relationship ( $t(34) = 3.28; p < .01$ ) (see Table II for means and standard deviations).

Table II. Self-Esteem Scores of Battered Women as a Function of Relationship Status:  
Mean and Standard Deviations

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD
Battered more than 1 year ago/Not currently with abuser	14	21.00	21.42
Battered within the past year/Not currently with abuser	15	-2.10	11.14
Battered within the past year/Currently with abuser	11	-0.87	13.14

Subsequent analyses were employed to determine if specific types of battering experiences were more likely to impact on self-esteem scores than others. Thus, *only* the Battered group of women ( $N = 48$ ) were included in the following analyses. *First*, a hierarchical cluster analysis was utilized to ascertain which battering experiences were likely to co-occur. Utilizing a principal components oblique method, this analysis yielded four clusters. As can be seen in Table III, Cluster 1 included eight battering experiences that might best be described as Physical Abuse (e.g., being pushed, hit with a fist or object, slapped). Cluster 2 included four experiences (i.e., being told who you can see and speak to, being told what to do, and kept from working) which was labeled as Emotional/Controlling Abuse. Cluster 3 was labeled as Sexual/Emotional Abuse because the five battering experiences comprising the cluster included such items as being treated as a sex object, being told you were crazy or stupid, etc. Finally, two experiences were included in Cluster 4: being bit and being told how to spend your money. This cluster was labeled Miscellaneous Abuse as it did not lend itself readily to interpretation. The standardized scoring coefficients for each cluster were added together and divided by the number of variables in each cluster so that every woman obtained a score for each of the abuse clusters. Thus, a woman who reported many of the experiences in the Physical Abuse cluster but few in the Emotional/Controlling Abuse cluster would have a high score on the former and a low score on the latter. The cluster scores were then utilized in the final analysis.

To determine if specific battering experiences were more related to low self-esteem than others, a multivariate regression analysis was employed with self-esteem score as the dependent variable and cluster scores as the independent variables. The analysis yielded a significant model effect ( $F(4,40) = 3.23, p = .02, R\text{-square} = .24$ ) and revealed that Emotional/Controlling Abuse and Miscellaneous Abuse scores were

Table III. Clusters of Battering Experiences

	$R^2$ with Own Cluster	$1 - R^2$ Ratio
Cluster 1 — physical abuse		
Pushed	.487	.631
Hit with fist	.596	.460
Hit with an object	.474	.620
Pinched	.448	.758
Had hair pulled	.727	.377
Slapped	.594	.480
Choked	.508	.569
Called derogatory names	.552	.644
Cluster 2 — controlling/emotional abuse		
Told who you can speak to	.912	.122
Told Who you can see	.845	.215
Told you can not work	.449	.701
Told what you can do	.845	.209
Cluster 3 — sexual/emotional abuse		
Sexually abused	.579	.510
Treated like a servant	.323	.747
Told you are stupid	.667	.441
Told you are crazy	.638	.457
Treated as a sex object	.620	.471
Cluster 4 — miscellaneous abuse		
Bit	.667	.398
Told how money is to be spent	.667	.368

significant predictors of self-esteem ( $t = -2.34, p = .02, b = -.409$ ;  $t = 2.45, p = .02, b = .369$ , respectively). Women with higher scores on the Miscellaneous Abuse cluster had higher self-esteem scores than women with low cluster scores. On the other hand, women who had higher scores on the Emotional /Controlling Abuse cluster had significantly lower self-esteem scores. No significant relationship was found for the remaining clusters: Physical Abuse ( $t = -1.28, p = .20, b = -.22$ ) and Sexual Emotional Abuse ( $t = -.95, p = .35, b = .159$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The present investigation found that battered women experience lower self-esteem than nonbattered women. This is consistent with information provided by other investigators (e.g., Mitchell and Hodson, 1983; Walker, 1979) who have suggested that low self-esteem is a characteristic often associated with battered women. The present investigation also sought to expand on previous work by determining: (1) if certain battering experiences were likely to occur together, and (2) whether particular clusters of battering experiences were more related to low self-esteem than others.

With regard to the clustering of battering experiences, the analyses revealed that some tended to co-occur and that most were easily identified (Physical Abuse, Emotional/Controlling Abuse, and Sexual/Emotional Abuse). The cluster identified as Physical Abuse included such experiences as being pushed, hit with a fist, pinched, slapped, etc. The Controlling/Emotional Abuse cluster included items that involved control by the husband or boyfriend and included such items as being told who you can see or speak to, what you can do, etc. The Sexual/Emotional Abuse cluster described abusive encounters that included both sexual abuse and ridiculing emotional abuse. Thus, included in the cluster with sexual abuse and being treated as a sex object were such items as being called crazy and stupid. The final cluster identified in the analysis (Miscellaneous Abuse) was not as easily described and included two experiences: being bit and being told how to spend your money. While many investigators have examined physical abuse or emotional abuse (e.g., Follingstad *et al.*, 1990; Hudson and MacIntosh, 1981; Mitchell and Hodson, 1983), to date there have been no empirical data to suggest that such a dichotomy was valid. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that a woman who has been slapped by her partner might also have experienced sexual abuse or emotional abuse from her partner. There has been an assumption that certain abusive experiences are likely to co-occur. However, until now, there has been no empirical support for the separation of various battering experiences.

The present investigation suggests that: (1) there are several clusters of battering behaviors that are likely to occur together, and (2) these clusters are congruent with previous conceptions of abuse (i.e., the separation of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse). Yet, this study also highlights the overlap between the three categories. For example, being called derogatory names was associated with physical and not emotional abuse. Additionally, sexual abuse appeared to occur in conjunction with a number of emotionally abusive ridiculing behaviors. Thus, characterizing experiences into strict categories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse may not reflect the real life experiences of battered women.



As was discussed previously, this investigation found that the group of Battered women were not homogenous in their levels of self-esteem. Two factors appeared to be related to level of self-esteem: (1) when the abuse occurred, and (2) the type of abuse experienced. Results of the current investigation indicate that women who had not experienced battering for over one year appear to have significantly higher self-esteem than women who had experienced battering within the past year. This evidence suggests that distancing oneself from an abusive relationship may have a positive impact on self-esteem over time. However, many other factors may also be contributing to higher levels of self-esteem. For example, it may be that the women who have not been battered within the past year could have had higher self-esteem scores throughout their battering experiences. Thus, their higher self-esteem in relation to the women who have currently or more recently experienced battering may not exclusively reflect the effect of time removed from a battering environment. Other factors such as counseling, support from friends and family, and gains in self-confidence may also be contributing to the discrepancy of self-esteem found within the Battered women group. The data presented here are suggestive; longitudinal designs are needed to determine the extent to which these findings are robust and perhaps causal.

As mentioned previously, this study also sought to determine if certain abusive experiences were more related to lowered self-esteem than others. While as a group, the battered women exhibited lowered self-esteem than nonbattered women, examination of the former group revealed that they were not homogenous. Not only had they experienced various forms of abuse, they also displayed disparate levels of self-esteem. When compared to other battered women, lowered self-esteem was not apparent among those women who had experienced physical abuse or sexual/emotional abuse. Also, women who experienced certain behaviors (being bit and being told how to spend your money) actually demonstrated higher self-esteem than women who had experienced other types of abuse. However, those women who had experienced emotional abuse of a controlling nature appear to be most detrimentally affected by their experiences. As a group, they exhibited the lowest self-esteem.

A relationship in which one partner attempts to control the behavior of another may be particularly damaging to the self-esteem of the individual experiencing these social and personal constraints. Such a situation may also lead to the learned helplessness described by Walker (1979) and others (Follingstad *et al.*, 1990). Engendering self-esteem and encouraging a sense of control might be emphasized in the treatment and assistance of women who are attempting to leave or cope with a controlling partner. It may be that due to a lowered self-esteem,

women in such relationships find it particularly difficult to make life changes that require regaining control of their lives. Thus, more work is needed to clarify the relationship between emotional abuse that is controlling in nature and self-esteem.

The present investigation suggests that controlling/emotional abuse might be particularly detrimental to self-esteem. However, all of the battered women in the present study identified themselves as victims of abuse by seeking assistance. Further investigation is called for to ascertain whether similar results might be noted among women who have *not* identified themselves as victims of abusive partners. Women who experience physical abuse may be likely to view their relationships as abusive due to the fact that our society has clearly labeled physical aggression as abusive. They may be more likely to be encouraged to seek help in terminating their relationships. Traditionally, emotional abuse has been more difficult to define. This may be particularly true of emotional abuse that is controlling in nature. In our society, men have traditionally been granted more power in determining the behavior of their mates. While attitudes have been changing, it may be more difficult to specify when a man has stepped beyond even traditional boundaries of control. Thus, women who are experiencing emotional controlling behaviors may be less likely to recognize that they are victims of abuse. Yet, the present investigation suggests that such women may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of lowered self-worth. It is important, then, to expand on this effort and examine the relationship between various controlling experiences and self-esteem in non-clinical populations. In addition, longitudinal studies examining possible changes in self-esteem that occur when battered women terminate their abusive relationships are needed. Data from such investigations could: (1) provide critical information in our attempt to gain a better understanding of the factors that are associated with lowered self-esteem, and (2) assist us in the development and implementation of heuristic interventions.

## REFERENCES

- Barksdale, L. S. (1972). *Building Self-Esteem*, Barksdale Foundation, Idyllwild, CA.
- Browne, A. (1986). Assault and homicide at home: When battered women kill. In M. J. Saks and L. Saxe (Eds.), *Advances in Applied Psychology* (Vol. 3), Erlbaum, Hillsdale, pp. 57-59.
- Burke, P. J., Stets, J. E., and Pirog-Good, M. A. (1988). Gender identity, self-esteem, and physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships. *Social Psychol. Quart.* 51: 272-285.
- Feraro, K. J. (1979). Physical and emotional battering: Aspects of managing hurt. *Calif. Sociologist* 2: 134-139.
- Finn, J. (1986). The relationship between sex-role attitudes supporting marital violence. *Sex Roles* 14: 235-234.

- Follingstad, D. R., Rutledge, L. L., Berg, B. J., Hause, E. S., and Polek, D. S., (1990). The role of emotional abuse in physically abusive relationships. *J. Fam. Viol.* 5: 107-119.
- Follingstad, D. R., Brennan, A. F., Hause, E. S., Polk, D. S., and Rutledge, L. L. (1991). Factors moderating physical and psychological symptoms of battered women. *J. Fam. Viol.* 6: 81-95.
- Hudson, W. W., and MacIntosh, S. R. (1981). The assessment of spouse abuse: Two quantifiable divisions. *J. Marr. Fam.* 43: 872-885.
- Mitchell, R. E., and Hodson, C. A. (1983). Coping with domestic violence: Social support and psychological health among battered women. *Am. J. Commun. Health* 11: 629-654.
- PageLOW, M. D. (1984). *Family Violence*, Praeger, New York.
- Walker, L. E. (1979). *The Battered Woman*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Walker, L. E. (1984). *The Battered Woman Syndrome*, Springer, New York.