Social Support and Disclosure of Abuse: Comparing South Asian, African American, and Hispanic Battered Women

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Sixty-two battered women who had accessed domestic violence services were asked to whom they disclosed the partner abuse, the responses they received, and how supported they felt by kin and nonkin network members. The findings showed that older women and those who had resided in the United States longer were more likely to make disclosures to kin members. Older women, those who had higher levels of perceived social support, and those who reported lower frequency of physical violence were more likely to disclose to nonkin members. The findings suggest that those women experiencing more severe abuse may be the least likely to disclose to others. As a group, the South Asian women were older and more educated, and greater proportions were or had been married to the abuser. In contrast to the other groups, a greater proportion reported having been burned or scalded and fewer reported being sexually coerced. In greater proportions, they disclosed the abuse to brothers and fathers and were advised to stay in their marriages. Service providers working with minority battered women must be knowledgeable of cross-cultural differences in the experience of abuse and disclosure patterns. Culturally appropriate and aggressive outreach within specific ethnic communities may be required to reach battered women in the community. Service providers must consider working with members of women’s informal support network to provide both emotional and instrumental support.

KEY WORDS: partner violence; social support; disclosure; battered women; racial differences.

There is a lack of research detailing the experience of domestic violence within various ethnic minority communities. Comparative data on ethnic minorities are particularly limited. The purpose of this paper is to describe and contrast the social support and disclosure experiences of a sample of South Asian, African American, and Hispanic battered women in the United States. This information is critical to explicating differences in how ethnically diverse battered women reach out for assistance, and the ways by which intervention may be tailored to their help-seeking patterns.

The psychosocial needs of battered women are tremendous. Women have had disruptions in their employment (Brown et al., 1999; Taylor Institute, 1996), have been isolated from their kin and nonkin social networks (Forte et al., 1996; Gelles, 1985), have an eroded sense of competence and self-esteem (Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Scott-Gilbra et al., 1995), and may be suffering from disabling levels of psychological distress (Giles-Sims, 1998; Thompson et al., 2000). Women who use shelter services are more likely to be impoverished (Sullivan & Rumpitz, 1994). In total, many are in need of legal services, health care, housing, child care, economic assistance, and counseling, (Eisenstat & Bancroft, 1999; Naumann et al., 1999; Sullivan et al., 1992; Weisz et al., 1998). Certainly, a battered woman’s ability to disclose abuse, and thereby receive instrumental and emotional support, is critical to her survival.

Past research has shown that there are several factors that shape help seeking on the part of battered women. Severity and frequency of abuse, availability of personal resources, perceived sense of self-efficacy, and the sensitivity of formal support systems may each influence a woman’s willingness to disclose the abuse to others (Gelles & Harrop, 1989; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998).
Additionally, there are likely many cultural influences that shape both perceptions of options within marriage and who is seen as a credible help provider. In a study by Das Dasgupta and Warrier (1996) with 12 South Asian battered women, adherence to traditional gender roles was revealed as a barrier to help seeking. The researchers found that women’s belief in the importance of being a good wife and mother and their willingness to sacrifice personal autonomy, and freedom to adhere to these beliefs deeply, shaped their willingness to seek assistance from outside sources and/or leaving the relationship. Economic independence did not provide these professional women with a sense of empowerment. Women reported that by speaking about the abuse they feared they would be seen as too “westernized.” As a result, many of them did not leave their marriages because they did not want to compromise their families’ honor with a divorce and damage the image of their community within the United States. Unlike African American and Hispanic women, many South Asian women come to the United States for arranged marriages in which the expectations for marriage differ. South Asian battered women often lack social and structural supports, knowledge of support systems available in the community, as well as facility with English language (Krishnan et al., 1998).

Finally, the process of acculturation to American values and norms is an important factor influencing help-seeking behavior. Acculturation has been found to be negatively related to attitudes supportive of wife beating among Asian Indians (Ganguly, 1998), and positively related to help seeking among battered Hispanic women (West et al., 1998). Caetano et al. (2000) suggested that without the aid of social support networks, the conflict and negotiation of values and norms of two cultures may heighten stress within Hispanic families increasing the risk for partner violence. On the basis of a survey of 527 couples, the researchers found that the rate of partner violence was highest among moderately acculturated couples in comparison to either the high or the low acculturation groups.

Despite cultural differences between South Asian, African American, and Hispanic women, these communities share a sense of familism and collectivism. Familism places value and importance on the family. It refers to the identification with and attachment to the nuclear and extended family characterized by strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity (Triandis et al., 1982). There are norms within each of these communities to rely on informal support networks in response to family crises (Balgopal, 1988; Kohn & Wilson, 1995; Santiago & Morash, 1995). Additionally, each community may be characterized by a value of collectivism, the importance of a collective over the individual (Gaines, 1997; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). Within this framework, individuals place the well-being of their community and/or family over the attainment of individual goals and well-being. Researchers have speculated that adhering to a value of collectivism may impede one’s sense of personal control (Sastry & Ross, 1998). What this may suggest is that there are cultural norms that influence a woman’s ability to disclose abuse and to whom she discloses.

Additionally, there are other belief systems that may limit a woman’s willingness to disclose family problems to both kin and nonkin. For Hispanic women, cultural values of respect, machismo (i.e., code of behavior that underscores maleness and virility), marianismos (i.e., a code of behavior that underscores the spiritual superiority of women over men), and simpatía (i.e., the avoidance of personal conflict; Comas-Diaz, 1984; Marin & Marin, 1991) may affect their decision to disclose the abuse to others and seek help.

Santiago and Morash (1995) presented one of the few studies available on the social support experiences of battered Hispanic women. Their 176-person sample was composed mainly of Mexican women (80%). Although the acculturation level of the women was not reported, they had lived in a large Midwestern metropolitan area for an average of 11 years. The researchers reported that 54% of the women went to family members for assistance, 47% went to social service agencies, and 36% went to a member of the clergy. Despite strong cultural norms to turn to family during times of trouble, 46% of the women did not disclose the abuse to a family member. Of those who chose to disclose, 12% reported that their families did not get involved when informed of abuse. Family members most often advised women to leave the partner. Other responses to disclosure included providing shelter and telling women to fight back. Only half of all women who accessed either formal or informal support found the assistance they received to be helpful (Santiago & Morash, 1995). Past research has suggested that there may be a pattern of underutilization of formal services within the Hispanic community (Rew et al., 1999; Wells et al., 1987). Others have suggested that the problem may be less the cultural preferences for family solutions and more the lack of financial resources and culturally and financially accessible services (Pinn & Chunko, 1997; Pumariega et al., 1998; Tiago De Melo, 1998).

African American women, having been born and raised in the United States, are most likely to have knowledge of formal support systems. However, accessibility of services may be low, especially for poor women, given the erosion of community services in low-income neighborhoods (Gondolf et al., 1988; Pinn & Chunko, 1997), and