

The Lesser of Two Evils:
Relationship Beliefs of Women who
Have Been Abused

Presentation to World Conference on
Prevention of Family Violence
Banff, AB October, 2005

Mary Russell, Ph.D.

School of Social Work and Family Studies

University of British Columbia

Purpose of Investigations

- **To explore ways in which abused women's relationship beliefs aid or hamper their attempts to keep themselves safe.**

Why focus on women?

- **Variability in women's responses to abuse provides an opportunity to learn from the entire range of responses.**

Why focus on relationship beliefs?

- **Popular attribution of motivation frequently depict personal beliefs, but there are few studies of beliefs.**
- **Individuals involved frequently explain their behaviour in terms of relationship beliefs.**
- **Understanding perspectives of these men and women can aid to prevent/remedy abuse**

Outline of Presentation

- *Description of relationship beliefs*
- *Summary of research on men's relationship beliefs*
- *Overview of context of women's decision-making*
- *Methodology of studying women's relationship beliefs*
- *Findings of women's relationship beliefs*
- *Practice implications of findings*

Belief Systems Theory

- *Belief systems theory posits that the organization of personality rests on the basis of individual beliefs that direct behavior, and influence affect and cognitions (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984).*
- *Beliefs are standards that are to a large extent derived, learned, and internalized from society and its institutions. They serve as standards to guide not only actions but also judgments, choices, arguments, rationalization and attribution of causality (Rokeach, 1979).*

Gendered Relationship Beliefs

- *Gendered beliefs and identities under-
grid the most compelling and robust
explanations of how power is allocated
and deployed [in relationships] and the
attitudes that sustain abusive cycles
(Wood, 1993).*

Self-in-Relation Model

Intimacy

Empathy

Mutuality

Connection

(Stone Centre, Wellesley College)

Question Regarding Men's Relationship Beliefs

- *Which of men's relationship beliefs support abusive behaviours and which beliefs support respectful behaviours toward their partners?*

Men's Relationship Beliefs

Abusive Beliefs

Respectful Beliefs

Central
Superior
Deserving

Connected
Equal
Mutually Engaged

Corresponding Beliefs of Women who Were Abused???

Beliefs of Abusive Men

Corresponding Beliefs of Women?

*Central
Superior
Deserving*

*Peripheral?
Inferior?
Servile?*

Factors Influencing Women's Decision Making

Inhibiting

Empowering

Internal

External

(O. Barnett, 2000).

External Inhibiting and Empowering Factors

Inhibiting Factors

Economic dependency
Unemployment
Criminal justice unresponsiveness
Dual arrest policies
Social isolation
No transportation
Lack of housing
Child care/support
Child custody disputes

Empowering Factors

Victim compensation
Community services
Domestic assault teams
Arrest of abusers
Social support
Coordinated services
Transition house space
Abuser programs
Protection orders

Internal Inhibiting and Empowering Factors

Inhibiting Factors

Denial, rationalization

Normalization

Self-blame

Learned hopefulness

Religious beliefs

Traditional beliefs

Post traumatic stress

Empowering Factors

Labeling behaviour as violence

Viewing self as victim

Self-empathy

External attribution

Concern for children's safety

Questioning beliefs

Positive self-regard

Understanding Impact of Factors

Leaving the abusive relationship is primarily contingent on the changes in the subjective meaning of the situation to the woman (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

Question Regarding Women's Relationship Beliefs

How do abused women's relationship beliefs aid or hamper their attempts to keep themselves safe?

Interview Guide

(sample questions)

- 1. Every relationship has its good parts and its bad parts. Tell me about the good parts? and the bad parts?*
- 2. What did you tell yourself when things were not going well?*
- 3. What kinds of things did you do to try to improve the relationship? What did your partner do? Whose responsibility was it to improve the relationship?*
- 4. Most people find that being in a relationship changes them in some ways. How as it changed you?*
- 5. If the relationship ended, what would be your biggest worry?*
- 6. What is the future of your relationship?*

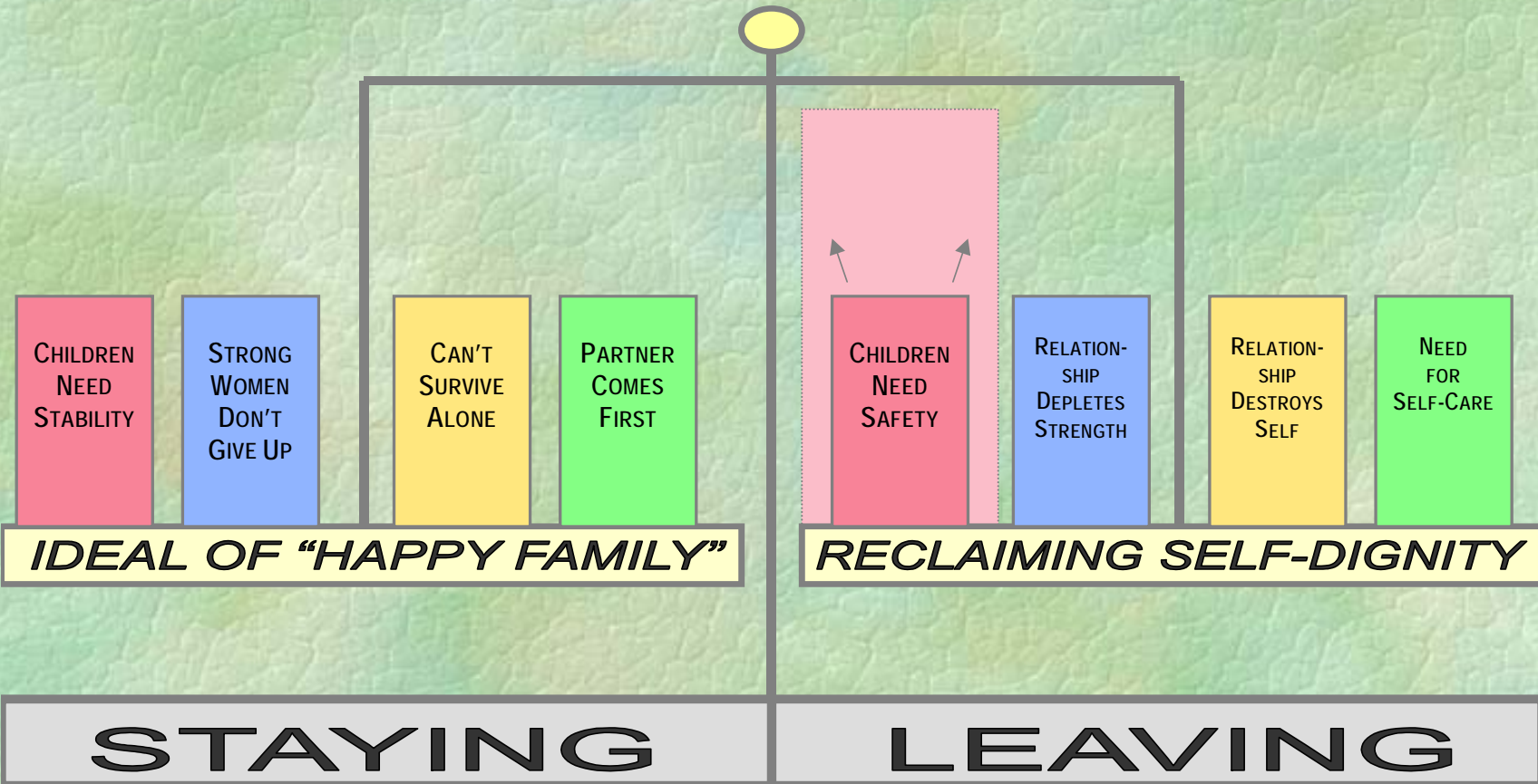
Women interviewed

- N=29
- Ages: 24 to 57
- Education: Post secondary N=12
- Employed N=20
- Children N=25
- Still in relationship N=21

Analysis

- Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
- Line by line analysis
- Open and axial coding
- Development of themes

The Lesser of Two Evils



Lesser of Two Evils Theme

- Women reported an active balancing of costs and benefits of remaining in their relationship realizing that either staying or leaving had costs: “*pain is the price you pay for the good times*”; “*my endless patience has cost me my dignity*”.

Ideal of Happy Family

Children Need Stability

Strong Women Don't Give Up

I Can't Survive Alone

Partner Comes First

Happy Family Ideal

I have my dream home and beautiful child. It is what I have always wanted. That is what is keeping us together.

Children Need Stability

There was no way we could separate because we had the girls. I stayed in the relationship because of the kids.

Strong Women Don't Give Up

I have spent the last year standing at the edge of a very large ditch looking down, going 'Honey, are you going to get out of the ditch any time soon?' He is trying really hard to pull me into the ditch because then we could be together in the ditch. But I don't want to be in the ditch and it is taking all my strength to keep my feet firmly planted at the edge of the ditch.

I Can't Survive Alone

*My biggest fear is that people will say,
'Nobody wants her. She will always be
single. She is a failure.'*

Partner Comes First

- *The relationship exists on his terms. To make it work I have to let it be what he wants it to be.*
- *It is OK if he needs to attack me to make himself bigger.*

Reclaiming Self-Dignity

Children Need Safety

Relationship Depletes Strength

Relationship Destroys Self

Need for Self-Care

Children Need Safety

- *My husband should realize that by hurting my son he is also hurting me. In the past when he swore at my son I just swallowed it and life went on. But now I can't take it anymore. There are some things that I just can't do.*
- *I don't want my son hiding under the bed with his hands over his head while the arguing and lashing out is going on.*

Relationship Depletes Strength

I am sitting on the fence right now [in terms of leaving]. I feel strong enough at this point to be really honest with him and myself. If things don't change, then I cannot go on.

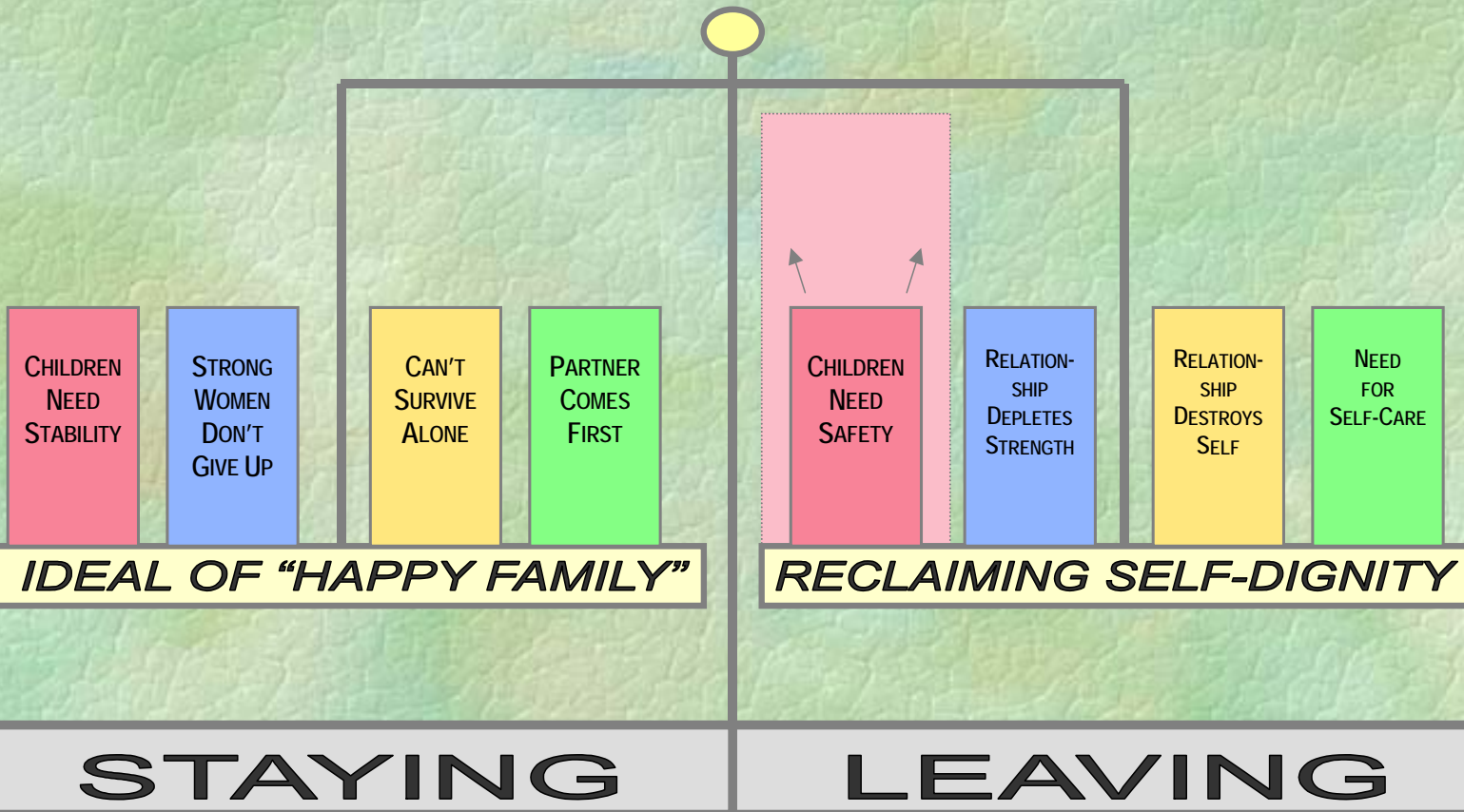
Relationship Destroys Self

I gave up my whole life for him and in the end I ended up losing everything, including me.

Need for Self-Care

I am learning [through counselling] to take back some control of my life. I am learning that it is OK to think of myself. I still find it hard to do that.

The Lesser of Two Evils



Development of Scale Items

- **Predominating Categories: :**
- Female responsibility for relationship maintenance
- Self-blame for problems
- Awareness of identity loss
- Importance of maintaining family constellation
- Expenditure of effort (strength) to maintain relationship
- Acceptance of male dominance (and female subservience) in relationship

- **Less Frequently Cited Categories:**
- Fear of being alone
- Avoidance of conflict
- Importance of finances
- Lesser of two evils

Agreed Upon Items (Preliminary analysis)

- 4. Being a wife involves “parenting” your partner
- 10. It is important to be an individual and set your limits
- 16. It is proper that he makes all the decisions for us
- 22. I tell myself the relationship could be a lot worse
- 23. It is my responsibility to avoid conflict in the relationship.
- 25. Equality in a relationship is crucial.
- 27. He decides what we do and I have to make it work.
- 31. I am more of a parent than a partner
- 35. It is easier to give in than to fight
- 38. I am treated more as a child than a partner.
- 49. My self-respect and self-esteem have suffered in this relationship
- 53. I have lost my voice in this relationship.
- 67. Women need to control their tongues to avoid provoking their partners
- 72. I am always at risk of being blamed.
- 132. It is up to me to make his life stress free.
- 144. Maintaining this relationship uses up all my energy..

Questions for Further Research

- To what extent do women in abusive relationships have different relationship beliefs than women in non-abusive relationships?
- Are their constellations of beliefs that keep women in abusive relationships?
- Are there constellations of relationship beliefs that aid women to keep themselves safe?

Implications for Practice

- *How does understanding the weighing of factors—i.e. The Lesser of Two Evils, enable helping professionals to assist women who are victims of violence?*
- *What are the implications for women with children?*
- *How does the understanding of women's paradoxical beliefs about their own strength enable more effective helping strategies?*
- *What are some effective strategies for fostering women's self-care?*