RURAL WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LEAVING DOMESTIC ABUSE

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Dedication

To Janice, Sarah, and Tanya.

Thank you for your stories.

Abstract

Domestic abuse embodies many forms including physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and spiritual abuse (Statistics Canada, 2011a). This study explored the experience of rural Alberta women who have left domestic abuse, as research on domestic abuse tends to be focused on urban settings. The "rural and small town" (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Celmenson, 2001, p. 1) definition was utilized in this study: an area outside of census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and census agglomerations (CAs). CMAs have population of 100,000 or more with a core of 50,000, and CAs have a core population of 10,000 plus (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1). Participants included both rural women who have left abusive relationships as well as service providers who offer resources to rural women fleeing abuse. Three women told their stories of leaving domestic abuse and five service providers took part in interviews. Using a narrative approach, I gained insight into the women's experiences while offering participants the opportunity to have their stories heard. Through content analysis numerous themes emerged from the interviews. There were four themes that were found to be common to urban and rural women and six themes that were unique to or exacerbated by the rural context. The themes associated with the rural context included (a) Under a Microscope, (b) It Didn't End There, (c) Lack of Resources, (d) Squashing My Spirit, (e) From Numb to Empowered, and (f) Reaching Out. Narratives have also been included to represent each woman's story.

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Chapter 1: Research Question and Background

"I think of the security of cages. How violence, cruelty, oppression, becomes a kind of home, a familiar pattern, a cage, in which we know how to operate and define ourselves" (Ensler, 2008, p. 137). Eve Ensler's (2008) words capture the essence of domestic abuse and how the routine and normalcy of it becomes life for women around the world. Women become trapped in a cycle of violence and begin to accept their role in the family system as a victim. Leaving this metaphorical cage is difficult due to financial constraints, lack of support, shortage of resources, and fear of shame (Eastman, Bunch, Williams, & Carawan, 2007; Hall Smith, Murray, & Coker, 2010; Logan, Stevenson, Evans, & Leukefeld, 2004; Scott, London, & Myers, 2002).

Domestic abuse is significant around the world but we sometimes forget that is in our own backyards. The physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse women endure from their partners is a reality for many women, and they face many issues when attempting to leave the abusive relationships. While it is important that counsellors understand challenges that all women in abusive relationships face, rural populations are often forgotten in the realm of research. These women are met with additional struggles that prevent them from leaving these abusive environments. Although the general population does know much about domestic abuse, Northcott (2011) reported that in Canada rates of domestic violence increased from 238 per 100,000 in 2006 to 281 per 100,000 in 2008. Further to this, between 2006 and 2008, rates of domestic abuse were higher in rural communities in comparison to urban areas, 392 per 100,000 in comparison to 129 per 100,000 in urban settings (Northcott, 2011). The rates of abuse in rural

communities have risen in recent years despite societal awareness of its existence (Northcott, 2011).

Due to physical isolation, the fear rural women feel in abusive relationships is heightened (Riddell, Ford-Gilboe, & Leipert, 2009). These women also experience self-blame for the abuse, reinforced by the rural beliefs portrayed by religious leaders who may suggest that the abused woman is the problem, and police officers who believe women provoke their partners (Riddell et al., 2009). In these isolated living conditions women in abusive relationships cannot always access transportation, and even when they are within walking distance of a shelter they report that in a small town they feel watched (Riddell et al., 2009). In Hornosty and Doherty's (2002) study, one woman reported that when her husband threatened to kill her she was certain that nobody would even know because their home was so isolated. Rural women in abusive relationships live in fear that is intensified by their isolation and stigma, yet the research is still lacking as to how best to assist them. Researchers must attempt to understand what these women contended with when they tried to access help leaving domestic abuse. Sutherns, McPhedran, and Haworth-Brockman (2004) reported that one in five Canadian women live in rural areas. This is a significant proportion of the population in our country, and there is a need to pay attention and to understand their challenges.

My intent in this research was to uncover the stories of women who have survived domestic abuse and who face further struggles due to their rural status. Through the women's stories this study aimed to understand the challenges and barriers these rural women endured when seeking help to escape abuse and overcome these obstacles. I explored what supports were helpful for these women and the personal strengths they

identified that helped them to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, I attempted to better understand the formal and informal resources that these women found effective and those that were ineffective.

Defining Domestic Abuse

There are numerous and varying definitions of domestic abuse. For the purpose of this study, I use the definition provided by the United Nations (UN) in the 1993 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. I found this definition to be inclusive and applicable to the research I engaged in. According to the UN, domestic abuse is

> any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (Article 1, para. 1)

Domestic abuse affects women across the world and in Canada, in all cultural, economic, and social groups; it is a form of oppression that traps women in dangerous, powerless situations (Laird McCue, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011a). Domestic abuse embodies many forms including physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and spiritual abuse (Statistics Canada, 2011a). Often these various types of abuse will coexist, resulting in detrimental effects on women's health, both physical and mental (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002). Domestic abuse also affects women's employment, parenting, and self-esteem (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Logan, Walker, Cole, Ratliff, & Leukefeld, 2003; Swanberg & Logan, 2005).

Rural Domestic Abuse

According to Statistics Canada, there are various definitions of the term rural, and du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, and Celmenson (2001) suggested that the researcher determine the definition based on the topic being addressed. In this study I chose to utilize a broader definition of rural in comparison to the commonly used census definition which will be discussed further in the chapter. It has been recommended by du Plessis et al. that the "rural and small town" (p. 1) definition is a good starting point. The definition for "rural and small town" (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1) is an area outside of census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and census agglomerations (CAs). CMAs have population of 100,000 or more with a core of 50,000, and CAs have a core population of 10,000 plus (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1). This definition also refers to areas outside of the commuting zone of centres of 10,000 or more.

While there is much research on domestic abuse it often focuses on urban populations, not considering the unique needs of rural women (Coyer, Plonczynski, Baldwin, & Fox, 2006; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001; Logan et al., 2003; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Rural women have numerous additional issues they face in conjunction with the abuse or their attempt to leave an abusive relationship (Logan et al., 2003). In comparison to their urban counterparts, women living in rural communities contend with geographical isolation, fewer resources, financial difficulties, less social support, and lack of confidentiality (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Eastman et al., 2007; Hage, 2006; Hall Smith et al., 2010; Logan, Cole, Shannon, & Walker, 2007; Logan et al., 2003; Shannon, Logan, Cole, &

Medley, 2006). All of these factors exacerbate the previously mentioned physical, mental, and employment issues suffered by women in abusive relationships.

A total of 63% of rural women who are being or have been abused described health issues as direct consequences of abuse in comparison to 13% of urban women (Logan et al., 2003). The reason for the difference between these populations is unclear but could likely be attributed to the lack of resources for care after the abuse. Women living in rural communities are often unable to receive medical attention quickly due to geographical isolation and lack of resources. Public transportation and health facilities may be 30 minutes away or more and, therefore, medical assistance is not prompt (Coyer et al., 2006).

An American study found that 88% of rural women who have been abused report depression as a result of the abuse (Logan et al., 2003). Rural women also tend to have lower self-esteem than urban women. Rural women are less likely to be employed and have lower overall incomes compared to urban women; therefore, when leaving an abusive relationship, lack of finances becomes a major issue. Financial issues also make it less likely that these women can afford legal consultation when needed.

Further to all of the health and financial issues these women face, rural women cannot always truly escape from an abusive partner without leaving behind everything else. When living in a rural community there is always the chance for encounters with the abuser as well as constant connections due to close ties in the community through businesses and family. This is not to mention the lack of resources for battered women in rural communities. Major issues for rural women being abused are the worry of stigma and lack of confidentiality, which are linked to residing in small communities (Eastman

et al., 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2004); these two major issues are what sparked this research. In many rural centres, domestic violence is considered to be a private family matter that others should not be involved in; therefore, rural communities are less likely to provide support (Eastman et al., 2007). Further, due to fear of embarrassment and family shame, women will often not report an abusive partner to avoid the judgment from community members (Krishnan et al., 2001). Many rural women face the issue of multiple close-knit relationships within a small community, which also means that there are dual role relationships existing as well. Oftentimes they have difficulty seeking help from the police department or other criminal justice resources because the abuser has friends or family within the jurisdiction. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2010) stated that rural women tend to be much more committed to their community: "[They are] not just leaving [their] partner. [They are] leaving [a] way of life. [They] put a lot of [themselves] into it" (p. 1).

In addition, confidentiality is considered a major issue for rural women (Logan et al., 2004). There were two main issues identified within the confidentiality concern: inability to be anonymous and the lack of trust in health care providers to maintain privacy (Logan et al., 2004). Rural women facing abuse report that everyone knows everyone in these areas, meaning that when seeking medical attention it is much more likely that they will know their health care providers on a more social level (Logan et al., 2004).

Although research has identified barriers women face when seeking help for domestic violence, it is clear that more in-depth knowledge from rural women is needed to capture the full complexity of their situations. Alberta has approximately 33 women's

shelters, most in major centres, but due to lack of space these shelters turned away over 7,000 women and children throughout the 2011–2012 fiscal year (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, 2011b). In most cases women from rural communities are forced to travel to shelters in larger communities and have nowhere else to go. According to Statistics Canada (2008b), Alberta has the third highest rate of domestic abuse in Canada, after Québec and Nunavut. A total of 18% of Alberta's population is considered rural (Statistics Canada, 2011c). In this case the census definition is being used, which Statistics Canada (2011c) defined as living outside of communities with populations of 1,000 and outside of centres with 400 persons per square kilometre. I use the census definition here in order to provide some statistical insight, as there are no statistics on rural populations attached to the du Plessis et al.'s (2001) definition. However, I consider the census definition to be quite strict in comparison to the rural and small town definition I chose to use in this study—areas outside of CMAs and CAs. As stated earlier, CMAs have population of 100,000 or more with a core of 50,000 and CAs have a core population of 10,000 plus (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1). I believe that given the strictness of the census definition it seems likely that women living in slightly larger centres than these face the same issues when seeking help for domestic abuse. I would suggest that there are women who face the difficulties of rural living although they do not necessarily fit into this definition of rural. The majority of issues faced by rural women as identified by the literature seem to be present in slightly larger communities as well. This is why I chose to follow the rural and small town definition as previously discussed.

My Interest in the Study

As a student and future counsellor I have taken interest in further understanding the survivors of abuse and what they have endured. I have been quite interested in the societal influences on violence against women and how society can change this. From my experience growing up in a rural community and observing the lack of resources and privacy, I became interested in how the rural context can affect abusive relationships and women's access to help.

Currently, there is an abundance of research on domestic abuse; however, this focuses mainly on urban women. As I have described, rural women face a number of additional problems when dealing with domestic abuse, yet research is lacking in this area. There are few studies that inquire into the abundance of barriers rural women face when attempting to leave abusive relationships. As a society, we are aware of the abuse in rural communities, yet it is increasing and this is a problem.

Significance of Study

Due to the lack of research on domestic abuse in rural communities of Canada, in this study I posed questions about this population with the hope of providing a multitude of service providers and other professionals with a better understanding of the unique tribulations of these women, which could then initiate the development of a new perspective for professionals. This study provided women with the opportunity to tell their stories in a novel way that is not based on them needing help or seeking resources. Participants told their stories with the knowledge that they could contribute to help other women in the situations they were once in, which I expected would be an empowering experience.

I opened my interview questions by asking the participants to tell me about their experience when they were leaving the abusive relationship. I followed this question with a number of clarifying questions:

- What challenges or barriers do you remember that may have made leaving or getting help more difficult?

- What about the resources and supports that were available? Tell me about those.

- What personal strengths or personal qualities do you recognize in yourself that helped you leave?

- Coming from a rural community what formal resources do you believe were missing?

- What informal resources did you use (i.e., family, friends, etc.)?

- Tell me about any social stigma or stereotypes (misconceptions or beliefs) about abuse you feel existed or exists in your community?

- How did these stereotypes and misconceptions impact you?

- Can you discuss how your self-understanding and beliefs about domestic abuse affected your ability to leave?

- Is there anything you would like to add or do you have any questions for me?

Purpose of the Study

Through this research I endeavoured to give women a chance to discuss what challenges they encountered when leaving their abusive relationships. I also wanted to provide them with an opportunity to discover what supports and strengths they possessed at those difficult times in their lives. Through a narrative inquiry, this study explored the barriers that rural women face when seeking help for domestic abuse, with the hope of

providing counsellors with the in-depth perceptions that are needed to fully understand the issues these women face. Narrative inquiry gives participants a full voice and requires intense active listening on the behalf of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The narrative process appreciates subjectivity but still seeks to answer questions about groups, communities, and contexts through the narratives of individuals. The purpose of implementing this process was to understand the challenges rural women identified as preventative of seeking and receiving help. Through their stories, I hoped to uncover the barriers these women faced and what supports were lacking in their time of need. I attempted to uncover the challenges they endured in order to help improve supports. I also hoped to help professionals, such as counsellors, law enforcement, and shelter coordinators, understand what these women perceived to be missing in their communities.

More specifically, in this research I strove to understand how a lack of resources and geographical isolation affected these women. I also found it important to explore if social stigma and small-town social beliefs influenced the steps these women took when attempting to leave their abusive partners. Link and Phelan (2001) defined stigma as "the co-occurrence of its components – labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" (p. 363) and stated that power over another must exist for stigmatization to occur. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) defined enacted and felt stigma, and I considered both when conducting this study. Enacted stigma is the discrimination or devaluation based on perceived inferiority or unacceptability that is socially imposed on women who are or have been in abusive relationships (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Felt stigma includes a sense of fear of enacted stigma but also involves the sense of shame felt by

women who have been or are being abused (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). I believed it would also be useful to hear about these women's perceptions of both formal and informal resources in their rural communities. I wished to uncover the supports the women found to be helpful and what strengths they recognized within themselves that helped them to leave their relationships.

Domestic abuse in all of its forms is an important issue to be addressed. Women's health, children, employment, and self-esteem are affected, and this form of abuse is happening at astoundingly high rates (Northcott, 2011). Rural women in abusive relationships, with their difficulties of obtaining health and protective services, are at serious risk of physical and mental health issues, and the stigma and lack of social support these women face is detrimental to their overall well-being. The intent of this study is to examine how women have been able to leave these relationships in order to increase services that can be provided.

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature in which I explore the various areas of research on domestic abuse. In Chapter 2, I make comparisons between rural and urban experiences, as well as identify the gaps in research pertaining to rural domestic abuse.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Domestic violence against women is an issue that has been and continues to be prominent across time and place. Although rates of domestic violence in Canada have fallen in recent years, it is still reported that 12% of all violent crimes reported are domestic abuse (Statistics Canada, 2011c). Unfortunately, police estimate that only 22% of all domestic violence incidents are reported, which is a very disturbing and frightening statistic (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 1, the UN (1993) definition of domestic violence is inclusive of physical, sexual, and mental harm imposed on women, occurring in both public and private. This definition includes not only the act of violence but also the threat of such, as well as coercion or deprivation of freedom.

Although domestic violence can include either male or female victims, 83% of all domestic assaults reported to police involve the abuse of a female (Statistics Canada, 2011c). Domestic violence has been researched by many disciplines since the 1970s and has been recognized as a complex social issue that requires further acknowledgment (Lanier & Maume, 2009).

In this chapter I discuss the relevant literature of various areas of this topic. I define domestic abuse, describe the various types of abuse, and explore what puts people at risk for these situations. I also discuss the many consequences of domestic abuse as well as the formal and informal resources available for women experiencing or leaving abuse. In this section, I also explain the process of leaving abuse. Throughout the review of the literature I compare urban and rural populations and I make a case for why research on rural women leaving abuse is necessary.

Defining Domestic Abuse

Laird McCue (2008) noted that there are a number of terms used interchangeably with domestic violence including battering, marital discord, and intimate partner violence. However, no matter the name, this is a form of oppression against women and less often men, trapping them in dangerous, powerless situations (Laird McCue, 2008). Laird McCue identified three main types of domestic abuse: (a) physical abuse, (b) emotional abuse, and (c) sexual abuse. *Physical abuse* is often the first that comes to mind when considering domestic abuse. In many cases the physical battering will begin with "minor" instances such as painful pinching or shaking and escalate to throwing, punching, broken bones, and in some cases homicide. Physical abuse often results in health issues, which can be either visible injuries or chronic health problems caused by persistent violence (Campbell, 2002). *Emotional abuse* involves elements such as ignoring the woman's feelings, minimizing her abilities as a wife and mother, or humiliating her in front of family and others (Laird McCue, 2008). Those who have been abused identified emotional abuse as one of the hardest to recover from, as it results in lowered self-esteem, and is a form of brainwashing. *Sexual abuse* is not limited to violent rape and can include demanding sex when the partner says no or making disparaging sexual comments to the abused (Laird McCue, 2008). Sexual abuse is present in the majority of domestic violence cases. Being forced to have sex after being beaten or forced to have sex with another person is also considered sexual abuse.

A fact sheet by the Canadian Women's Foundation (2011) has identified two other types of domestic abuse—financial and spiritual abuse. *Financial abuse* involves the abuser having full control of the household money or forcing the abused partner to work

or not work (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2011). Financial abuse is also described as the abusive partner refusing to grant the woman access to or knowledge of family income (Romans, Forte, Cohen, Du Mont, & Hyman, 2007). *Spiritual abuse* occurs when spiritual or religious beliefs are used to manipulate or control an individual; this includes ridiculing the woman's beliefs or preventing her from practicing her beliefs (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2011). The five categories of domestic abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, financial, and spiritual) generally occur simultaneously, keeping those being abused helpless and violated across these various life aspects.

Who is at Risk?

A Canadian survey regarding domestic abuse found that, across the country, abused women are more likely to be younger, single (divorced or separated), and have less education (Romans et al., 2007). The survey also found that females reported more physical and sexual violence than men and sustained more types of abuse with increased severity (Romans et al., 2007). Women reported much more overlap in various types of abuse (physical, emotional, financial, and sexual) than men, with 9% experiencing all types and 28% reporting emotional, financial, and physical abuse (Romans et al., 2007).

Women across all cultures and lifestyles experience domestic abuse, and the causes and effects of this have been well researched. However, as Van Hightower and Gorton (2002) suggested, there is a lack of research specifically examining rural women facing domestic abuse, and attention needs to be paid to their unique situation. Although Romans et al. (2007) provided an excellent sample of the Canadian population and their experiences with domestic abuse, they did not compare the prevalence rates between rural and urban populations. Due to unique barriers and difficulties, rural women facing

domestic abuse need to learn different survival and coping strategies (Hornosty &
Doherty, 2002). The different issues and challenges that this population of women face
along with experiencing domestic abuse needs to be addressed.

Further to the issues that rural women face when experiencing domestic abuse,
there should also be light shed on the subcultures that exist in our society. Vulnerable
positions are generally based on class, gender and race (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002).
Groups of women that may already feel isolated and vulnerable without domestic abuse
may include, those with disabilities or different cultural backgrounds making the barriers
and issues they face even more complex. Aboriginal and immigrant women are
discussed in more detail in the following sections. While this study discusses the
experiences of rural women, it is important to keep in mind that there may be women
who are feeling isolated and vulnerable due to even smaller communities that they belong
to within the rural community.

Aboriginal Women

Aboriginal women in Canada are at a higher risk for physical and sexual violence
in their lifetime (Brownridge, 2003; Romans et al., 2007). In a study looking at
Aboriginal women who have experienced abuse, McEvoy and Daniluk (1995) found that
over their entire lives these women faced numerous forms of trauma and abuse. McEvoy
and Daniluk reported five of the six Aboriginal women who participated had multiple
abusers, the majority being members of their nuclear and extended families. The women
also indicated that they faced barriers in seeking services such as counselling due to
stereotypes about Aboriginal people, in particular Aboriginal women (McEvoy &
Daniluk, 1995).

Brownridge (2003) conducted a study that took into consideration two large surveys of the Canadian population and examined the escalated risk of violence for Aboriginal women. Many of the studies Brownridge reviewed suggested that this higher risk could be attributed to colonization. Colonization was the deliberate attempt by Canadian governments to destroy Indigenous institutions of family, religious belief systems, tribal affiliation, customs, and traditional ways of life through enacted and enforced legal sanctions. Colonization is marked by cultural assimilation and destruction tactics in the form of residential schools, removal of Indigenous groups from ancestral lands, and cultural genocide (Duran, 2006). Risk factors for violence in general were also highly represented in the Aboriginal community. Brownridge compared two large surveys of Canadian populations and examined factors that may contribute to the high rates of violence in the Aboriginal community. These factors included social background, situational characteristics, and patriarchal dominance.

Aboriginal women were at a higher risk across all variables except for patriarchal dominance. In the more recent survey included in Brownridge's (2004) study, Aboriginal women were less likely to be denied access to family income as they had been in the past. In a later survey included in Brownridge's study, there were 15.9% more Aboriginal women living in rural areas than had been reported in the earlier survey, which was likely due to the change of rural definition. I find this to be important in that the definition of rural can sometimes be restricting and there can be a lack of recognition that more women are facing rural barriers. Another risk factor that was found to be prominent for the Aboriginal women facing domestic abuse was alcohol consumption. Brownridge suggested that these risk factors were not as strongly considered in the earlier survey, and

examining these factors more closely reveals indirect support of colonization having a major impact on the increased rate of domestic abuse for Aboriginal women.

Immigrant Women

The Canadian 2006 census estimated that 3.2 million immigrant women in Canada originate from more than 220 countries (Chui, 2011). In addition to this, approximately 76% of immigrant women are visible minorities. Canadian immigrant women have been found to utilize shelters, crisis lines, and medical and legal services less than the general population of women in abusive situations (MacLeod et al. & Smith, as cited in Hyman, Forte, Du Mont, Romans, & Cohen, 2006). Hyman et al. (2006) found that the likelihood of reporting domestic abuse is related to the length of time the woman has been living in the country. Women who have recently immigrated to Canada are more likely to report domestic abuse to police than immigrant women who have lived in the country longer; however, they are less likely to use social services (Hyman et al., 2006). Smith (as cited in Hyman et al., 2006) suggested that there should be culturally appropriate assessments in place and approaches to help immigrant women; service providers need to consider a number of factors, including immigration status, ethnic background, acculturation, language proficiency, economic status, and previous experiences with violence. These suggestions are supported by Menjívar and Salcido's study conducted in 2002, which identified a number of elements that contribute to barriers faced by immigrant women in abusive relationships. These barriers include language barriers, a sense of and actual isolation, economic changes, legal status, and a shifted cultural frame of reference (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). Considering the high population of immigrant women in Canada, these barriers and suggestions for

improvement are important to consider. It is also vital for counsellors to be aware of the possibility that the barriers faced by immigrant women are exacerbated by living in rural or small towns.

Urban versus Rural Populations

Academics suggested that most research on domestic violence focuses on urban populations and that further inquiry is needed for rural communities (Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2003; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Rural communities tend to be more economically disadvantaged and have less access to health care services (Gesler & Rickettsas, as cited in Logan et al., 2003). Researchers found that rural women who experienced domestic abuse face different challenges than urban women (Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2003; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). While it is vital that people understand the issues that all domestically abused women face, it is of great importance to delve further into the unique experiences of rural women.

Rural living will often isolate families geographically, as households may be located several kilometres away from each other. Further, if one's home is at a distance from town, medical and police assistance will be much harder to receive, or at the very least slower to arrive (Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007). Krishnan et al. (2001) suggested that rural areas tend to have the appearance of less domestic violence rates because of women's reluctance to disclose due to fear of social stigma. Websdale (as cited in Lanier & Maume, 2009) suggested that rural households are geographically and socioculturally isolated. The patriarchal ideology and gender role views in rural areas intensify the impact of the isolation (Websdale, as cited in Lanier & Maume, 2009). Logan et al.

(2004) identified six main rural and urban differences that exist for domestically abused women. Rural women face limited services, poor economic status, patriarchal gender roles, lack of confidentiality, and how their social or political connections or lack thereof affected their safety (Logan et al., 2004). These themes are apparent in most of the research and there is the possibility that they may worsen the effects of domestic abuse as well as possibly limit rural women from accessing the help that they need.

Reasons for Domestic Abuse

There has been much research conducted in an attempt to understand why domestic abuse occurs. This section gives a brief overview of Flynn and Graham's (2010) framework that attempts to explain domestic abuse, a brief look at the perspective of the feminist lens, as well as the influence of culture on domestic abuse.

Flynn and Graham (2010) suggested that a concise framework was needed due to the wide variety of research and approaches in attempting to explain domestic abuse. Flynn and Graham created a model that included three levels: (a) background and personal attributes of the perpetrator or victim, (b) current life circumstances, and (c) immediate precursors or precipitators. The first level is considered stable, and these attributes can be perceived as the main or only explanation for the abuse and include traits such as upbringing, past experiences, mental health, personality, and values. Level two issues could be perceived to increase tension in the relationship that lead to abuse, including marital unhappiness, alcohol, and economic issues. Finally, level three includes issues that were perceived as immediately leading to violence, comprising of provocation by the partner, communication issues, hot-button issues, and assertion of power.

Anderson (1997) suggested that a feminist lens should be integrated into the sociodemographic explanations for domestic abuse. Scholars from the feminist perspective suggest that domestic abuse is rooted in issues of gender and power and men's desire to maintain dominance and control (Anderson, 1997). The feminist perspective stresses the importance of the cultural construction of femininity when looking at reasons for why women do not leave abusive situations (Anderson, 1997). Patriarchal ideologies that often exist in rural communities can make rural women particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse (Websdale as cited in Lanier & Maume, 2009). Jewkes (2002) suggested that patriarchal ideology in relation to domestic abuse can suggest a power differential between men and women, thus contributing to the potential for domestic abuse.

Even with these categories of perceived provocations or traits that lead to abuse, counsellors also need to consider perceptions from various cultures and societies. Researchers have developed further understanding of abuse and social construction; as such, counsellors need to consider how the women who have been abused or are being abused interpret their experiences (Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008). Social constructionism is the theory that each individual reality is unique. Everyone's perspective is shaped and interpreted by their personal experiences and relationships (Gergen as cited in Hall, 2005). This, of course, is going to differ across populations including between urban and rural experiences. By considering the woman's individual perception of what the abuse means, researchers avoid forcing the their own interpretations and develop a more meaningful understanding the participant's experience (Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008). Culture has a significant impact on each individual's interpretation of abusive

experiences, and Lindhorst and Tajima (2008) suggested that researchers should focus not just on the negative implications of culture but also on the positive or beneficial factors. By exploring the degree to which culture plays a role in a woman's story, researchers can make suggestions about how a rural culture differs from an urban culture for those experiencing abuse.

Effects of Domestic Abuse

The aftermath of abuse and violence go beyond broken bones and black eyes. Physical and mental health, employment, and parenting are all affected by the various types of abuse (Adler, 1996; Bonomi et al., 2006; Campbell, 2002; Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Hage, 2006; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Lloyd, 1997; Logan et al., 2004; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008; Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995). Women who have been abused by an intimate partner have worse overall health than women who have never been abused (Bonomi et al., 2006). A total of 63% of rural women directly described the health consequences of abuse in comparison to only 13% of urban women (Logan et al., 2003). However, in her review of the literature, Annan (2008) found that only 11 of 48 articles related to this topic examined rural women.

Physical health. Abused women suffer physical trauma that has short- and long-term effects, which manifest as poor overall health and quality of life (Campbell, 2002). The most common short-term injuries that abused women suffer are battery and trauma to the face, upper torso, breast, or abdomen (Campbell et al., 2002). Abused women more frequently reported chronic issues, such as headaches, back pain, fainting, and seizures, which are attributable to ongoing stress or neurophysiology problems caused by the abuse (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002). According to Campbell (2002), 10–44% of

women have been choked or suffered blows to the head to the point of unconsciousness, which can have a range of medical implications including neurological issues. The significant number of battered women who suffer from gastrointestinal disorders and hypertension is attributed to the chronic stress that they have endured (Campbell, 2002). Campbell et al. (2002) also reported that women who have been abused report more sexual health issues such as sexually transmitted infections, urinary tract infections, and pelvic pain, mainly due to sexual abuse. Unfortunately, seeking help for injuries or receiving immediate medical attention can be very difficult for rural women. These women often lack public transportation and health care facilities may be 30 minutes or more away; therefore, medical assistance may not be prompt (Coyer et al., 2006).

Mental health. Women who have been physically, verbally, and sexually abused experience perceived psychological impairment along with worsened mental health (Tomasulo & McNamara, 2007). Campbell and Soeken (1999) found posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression to be the most common mental health issues for women who have experienced domestic abuse. Hage (2006) studied survivors of domestic violence who reported PTSD symptoms and found that symptoms were exacerbated by accompanying difficulties, including financial struggles and limited resources for receiving help. Mechanic et al. (2008) measured PTSD and depression in participants who had experienced at least two severe or four minor abuse incidents within the past year. Of 413 women, 45.0% met criteria for moderate to severe PTSD symptoms, while 39.6% experienced severe depressive symptoms (Mechanic et al., 2008). While 7.5% of PTSD symptom variance was accounted for by physical and sexual violence, significant predictors of PTSD symptoms were harassment, emotional

and verbal abuse, and minor injuries (Mechanic et al., 2008). Harassment and emotional and verbal abuse also significantly predicted depression (Mechanic et al., 2008), reinforcing women's view that emotional abuse is the hardest to overcome (Laird McCue, 2008). Mechanic et al. (2008) suggested that recovery from these mental health issues would be difficult due to other issues resulting from abuse or leaving the relationship, such as parenting stress, poverty, and loss of material and social resources.

Logan et al. (2003) found that seven out of eight rural women reported depression as a result of domestic abuse in comparison to seven out of 15 urban women. While previous research has identified PTSD and depression as the most common psychological issues for abused women, further consequences include insomnia, chronic anxiety, and social dysfunction (Ratner, 1993). Ratner (1993) identified that alcohol and drug abuse also arise as a coping mechanism for this population of women. Rural women scored significantly higher for multiple mental health issues such as phobias, interpersonal sensitivity, and anxiety (Logan et al., 2003).

Rural women seem to have lower self-esteem than urban women (Logan et al., 2003). When asked to list things they were proud of or things they liked about themselves, rural women said they were proud of following through on protective orders and listed nothing that they liked about themselves (Logan et al., 2003). Urban women, however, were proud of work related tasks and reported liking personal traits about themselves such as being a good mother or being attractive (Logan et al., 2003). This difference in work related self-esteem might be related to the overall lower employment rates in rural communities (Slama, 2004). Further, as will be discussed in the next section, women in abusive relationships in general tend to have lower employment rates

(Lloyd, 1997). The differences between rural and urban women in regards to self-esteem and how it has been affected by abuse are clear through these statements as reported in these three studies.

Employment. Lower employment rates have been reported for women who are suffering or have suffered from domestic violence (Lloyd, 1997). Of 824 women interviewed by Lloyd (1997), 69% who reported physical aggression also reported being unemployed. Swanberg and Logan (2005) identified three categories of abusive tactics used by partners to keep women from attending work: actions taken before, during, and after work.

Swanberg and Logan (2005) found that 56% of women had action taken against them before work that prevented them from going. Abusers sometimes physically restrained their partners to prevent them from leaving the house, or would beat them so severely that the women could not or would not attend work. Abusers would also use more indirect ways of preventing the women from working such as restricting sleep or destroying work clothes. In fact, the majority (88%) of women were affected in this way (Swanberg & Logan, 2005).

Victimizing actions taken at work included showing up at the workplace or making harassing phone calls to both the woman and her coworkers or supervisor (Swanberg & Logan, 2005). These types of incidents often lead to resignation from the job due to embarrassment, safety issues, or coercion to resign by means of threats made by abusive partner (Swanberg & Logan, 2005).

Abuse after work mainly consisted of physical violence because the abuser was unhappy with his partner speaking to certain coworkers or customers or even believing

that the woman was not making enough money (Swanberg & Logan, 2005). While women reported quitting their jobs due to the abuse, there were also instances of job termination due to persistent absences or disruption in the workplace caused by the abuser.

Less than half the women reported disclosing the abuse to coworkers, and those who did disclose did so to receive emergency protective orders or only after persistent incidents when coworkers had "figured out what was going on" (Swanberg & Logan, 2005, p. 11). Women's rationales for maintaining secrecy about the abuse included concerns of being fired, embarrassment, and the sense that they could take care of themselves (Swanberg & Logan, 2005).

In Lloyd's (1997) study, nearly half of the women participants made a connection between the inability to work and the inability to leave the abusive relationship. This fits with the results of Swanberg and Logan's (2005) study, which also showed eventual unemployment as a result of abuse. If a woman is prevented from maintaining a job or is fired due to consequences of abuse interfering with a job, she cannot support herself outside of the relationship. Rural women are less likely to be employed compared to urban women and also have lower overall incomes, a significant barrier to leaving an abusive relationship.

Mothering and children. Domestic violence has many negative effects on children and parenting (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Lack of finances is an obvious result of unemployment and becomes a barrier to leaving the relationship, in part due to the woman's fear of insufficient finances to provide for both herself and her children (Lloyd, 1997).

In Canada it is estimated that 360,000 children a year witness or experience family violence (UNICEF, The Body Shop International, & the Secretariat for the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children, 2006). Although it is often assumed that children in homes with domestic abuse are unaware, it has been found that 40–80% of the violence is seen or heard by the children (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007). Children may experience self-blame, shyness, insecure attachment, low trust, dissociation, and aggression (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007). There may also be issues at school due to developmental delays and preoccupation with the home environment (Government of Alberta, Human Services, Children and Youth, 2008; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007).

Children who witness or are aware of domestic violence in their homes can experience ongoing issues such as anxiety, insomnia, socialization problems, and aggression into adulthood (Government of Alberta, Human Services, Children and Youth, 2008). Children who grow up in abusive environments are also more likely to be in abusive relationships as adults, either as victims or perpetrators (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007).

When Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2001) looked at the effects that domestic violence has on childhood adjustment as well as the impacts on parenting due to psychological issues, they found that 25% of variance of childhood adjustment was accounted for by exposure to domestic violence. Since the abused mother's psychological functioning is often impaired by depressive symptoms and lowered self-esteem, parenting abilities are affected (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Chemtob and Carlson (2004) found that 84% children reported having witnessed their

mothers as a target of physical violence. The majority of mothers reported attempting to protect their children from the abuse and considered witnessing the abuse as psychologically and emotionally damaging to the children (Chemtob & Carlson, 2004). However, abused mothers suffering from PTSD tended to underestimate the level of distress experienced by their children (Chemtob & Carlson, 2004). While 40% of the children showed symptoms of PTSD, it was found that 92% of mothers received psychological help for themselves and a surprising 91% did not seek professional help for their children (Chemtob & Carlson, 2004). PTSD is associated with other dysfunctional emotional and behavioural patterns that subsequently may have long-term effects on the children (Chemtob & Carlson, 2004).

The magnitude of effects domestic abuse has on those who experience it is significant. Most women will suffer from a combination of consequences that influence each other and diminish their mental, physical, and social functioning.

Resources

Availability and use of various resources would certainly help these women who have been domestically abused to avoid or recover from the severe consequences of abuse. The literature covered many areas of formal and informal resources that these women rely on, as well as the coping mechanisms they commonly used (Hall Smith et al., 2010; Laird McCue, 2008). Unfortunately, women who are abused are not always able to access these resources, or they no longer have the self-esteem or self-efficacy to cope (Adler, 1996; Coyer et al., 2006). There are even further constraints for rural battered women in accessing both formal and informal support.

Reporting and screening of domestic violence. Hage (2006) suggested that many women simply do not possess the language to recognize and describe the abuse; this may be a barrier to knowing when and how to report incidents. Other barriers to seeking help are the lack of awareness or knowledge about how to get help and the lack of information on the result of reporting domestic abuse (Lutenbacher, Cohen, & Mitzel, 2003). One woman described being unsure of calling the police for help because she did not know the procedure: "If I call the police, does that mean they come with the sirens screaming or can they just come to my door quietly?" (Lutenbacher et al., 2003, pp. 59–60). Educating women and the general public is vital, particularly in rural communities where there are stigmas surrounding domestic abuse (Eastman et al., 2007).

In an American study, Logan et al. (2003) reported that only three of eight rural women and four of 15 urban women who have been abused have ever been asked about domestic violence by a health care or mental health professional. Since the women are unsure of how to reach out, it is imperative that professionals in health care become more active in identifying abuse.

Women should be routinely screened for domestic abuse, and health care systems need to provide adequate detection of domestic abuse (Borowsky & Ireland, 2002; Brown, Lent, & Sas, 1993). Researchers reported health care providers have been encouraged to screen more often for partner abuse; however, health care workers have been criticized for not providing adequate treatment or information to women experiencing domestic abuse (Wathen et al., 2009). Although there are continual suggestions for more and improved screening for domestic abuse, there is little evidence as to which tools and interventions are effective (MacMillan et al., 2009). The main

explanation for this situation is lack of education amongst health care professionals regarding domestic abuse (McCarney & McKibben, as cited in Coyer et al., 2006). MacMillan et al. (2009) examined how screening for abuse in health care setting for all women could identify and impede abuse and improve quality of life. The Woman Abuse Screening Tool (WAST) was used to complete screening on randomized days at health facilities (MacMillan et al., 2009). The WAST was found to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.95$) and also showed construct validity with total scores being highly correlated ($r = 0.96$) with scores from the Abuse Risk Inventory (Brown, Lent, Schmidt, & Sas, 2000). The WAST results between abused and nonabused women were significantly different, suggesting discriminant validity (Brown et al., 2000). Women were randomly assigned to take part in a screening process that required them to complete the WAST prior to their medical appointment. The results of their WAST were included in their file for their doctor. Other participants were not screened for abuse prior to their appointment but for the purpose of the study, completed the WAST afterward. Of the 2,733 women screened prior to seeing their physician, 13% had experienced abuse in the past 12 months; in the group of 2,948 women who were not screened beforehand, 12% had experienced abuse in the 12 months prior (MacMillan et al., 2009).

Through follow-up appointments researchers found that the women who completed the WAST prior to their appointments reported improved quality of life and lower depression scores in comparison to those who were not screened (MacMillan et al., 2009). The study used the Consequences of Screening Tool (COST), developed for this study, its purpose is to measure any harm caused by screening the women for domestic abuse (Lock as cited in MacMillan et al., 2009). The researchers in this study analyzed

the Quality of Life subscale as it applied to all women who took part (MacMillan et al., 2009). The first study to evaluate the COST found that this subscale had a test-retest reliability of 0.74 and an internal consistency of $\alpha = .73$ (MacMillan et al., 2009). MacMillan et al.'s (2009) study found an internal consistency of $\alpha = .66$. According to the COST results, there did not appear to be any harm done by screening women who were not experiencing domestic abuse.

Since research has shown the positive effects of screening women in health care facilities on a regular basis, there should also be further exploration of how to best detect abuse and promote resources for women. This would be especially beneficial for rural communities, since in many cases women attempt to protect their families from public scrutiny or have much less support in reporting domestic abuse (Alston, 1997). Screening would likely increase the reporting and understanding of psychological abuse along with the physical or sexual abuse that takes place. Due to lack of privacy, education, understanding of domestic abuse, and rural beliefs, many rural women who are experiencing psychological abuse in their homes are unable to report it or receive help (McCallum & Lauzon, 2005).

Formal resources. Laird McCue (2008) identified a variety of resources available to women who have been or are being abused, including shelters, the judicial system, law enforcement, and the health care system. Unfortunately, these resources often go unused or are simply not helpful to people experiencing the abuse (Henning & Klesges, 2002; Lutenbacher et al., 2003). Factors contributing to the lack of use or the perception of unhelpfulness of services include socioeconomic status, relationship status, age, lack of transportation, lack of knowledge of abuse on behalf of service provider,

awareness of resources, and fear of consequences (Henning & Klesges, 2002;

Lutenbacher et al., 2003). Even when the services are available, transportation and

financial restraints are also major issues for rural women (Eastman et al., 2007; Scott et

al., 2002). In many rural areas public transport is not available, and if the women live in

a household with a vehicle, abusers will often limit access by hiding keys or limiting gas

(Coyer et al., 2006). Lack of transportation is a major issue when health services may

range from 30 minutes to several hours away (Adler, 1996; Coyer et al., 2006). Bosch

and Bergen (2006) reported that rural women live an average of 77.9 miles from a shelter

and 5.5 miles away from town. These distances are reported from a study in Kansas, but

this information helps to paint a picture of rural living (Bosch & Bergen, 2006). Living

in such isolated areas also proves to be a concern for leaving an abusive relationship,

since the women will often have to relocate to an entirely new area in order to fully

escape (Eastman et al., 2007). Relocation frequently occurs, as rural women

experiencing domestic violence are often employed by the abuser's family or may not be

able to find work to support themselves due to the economic plights of rural populations

(Krishnan et al., 2001).

In Shannon et al.'s (2006) study, urban women reported a significantly higher rate

of seeking and using formal resources; however, the variance in availability of such

resources is not discussed. Rural women believed that domestic violence was a low

priority for police and some even reported calling the fire department when they were in

danger as they would likely receive help faster (Logan et al., 2004). Battered women

from rural Texas voiced that they need to be treated more respectfully by police officers

and that they should be provided with more information about their options for pressing

charges or finding shelter (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Peace officers in the area validated the women's concerns, as officers admitted they often do not make arrests because they frequently doubt the credibility of the woman or if probable cause for an arrest has been satisfied (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Peace officers noted that there is lack of sufficient police training on domestic violence (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002).

In comparison to urban women, rural women are more likely to use attorneys as opposed to police; this is likely due to the women's perception of being a low priority for police (Shannon et al., 2006). Unfortunately, while rural abused women are more likely to seek legal help, they often cannot afford these types of services, whether due to economic factors of rural living or financial constraints placed on them by the abusers (Logan et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2002). In an American study, Logan et al. (2004) uncovered a number of factors by asking women who have been abused to identify barriers, which the researchers then examined. Logan et al. (2004) reported affordability as a barrier for rural women seeking criminal justice services; some women reported paying for an emergency protective order, although in the area in which the study was conducted, protective orders were meant to be free when utilized for the safety of the woman. Women who did press charges stated they felt they were often not well informed of the status of their cases and also that the abusers were not reprimanded to the full extent of the law (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002).

Eastman et al. (2007) found that rural service providers indicated that the resources available to those experiencing domestic violence are not enough to meet the needs of the women. General consensus amongst service providers is that the lack of

resources is a key factor in the decision to leave an abusive relationship (Eastman et al., 2007). Service providers in rural communities suggested that the church is often a strong influence on the community members in general and often counsel abused women to try to make the marriage work or to wait for the "difficulty to work its way through" (Eastman et al., 2007, p. 710). Hage (2006) suggested that it is vital for service providers to acknowledge the women's strengths and the fact that she has survived abuse.

A major issue for seeking help from any formal resources for rural women is the worry of stigma and lack of confidentiality (Eastman et al., 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2004). Eastman et al. (2007) noted that in many rural communities, domestic violence is considered to be a private matter of the household. Further, due to fear of embarrassment and family shame, women will not report an abusive partner to avoid the judgment from community members (Krishnan et al., 2001). In many cases, people in rural communities listen to police scanners in their homes, and may overhear police reports of domestic abuse and discuss the situation with others in the community (Hornosty & Doherty, 2002). Many rural women face the issue of multiple relationships within a small community; oftentimes the abuser has friends or family in the police department or other criminal justices resources.

Service providers indicated that rural community members often make assumptions that blame the women or ignore the fact that domestic violence is a local issue (Eastman et al., 2007). Educating the general public about domestic violence can reduce wrongful blame and inform people of the presence of domestic abuse, which is an important first step (Eastman et al., 2007). When discussing barriers faced in seeking help, abused women identified acceptability of the abuse as a factor (Logan et al., 2004).

For rural women, cultural factors often played a powerful role as to whether or not they chose to seek help (Logan et al., 2004). Fear of embarrassment plays a role in a number of ways. Rural residents have a high sense of independence and believe that they should be able to manage their own issues. They also fear the stigma of being labelled with a mental health issue (Logan et al., 2004).

Confidentiality is a concern mentioned amongst urban women but was a major issue for rural women (Logan et al., 2004). Two main issues identified were the inability to remain anonymous and the lack of trust in health care providers to maintain privacy (Logan et al., 2004). Women report that everyone knows everyone in the rural areas and that can mean knowing health care providers on a more personal or social level (Logan et al., 2004). Anonymity is an issue since there is not a lot of choice for service providers, and in some cases there is one specific room for rape or abuse incidents, making it nearly impossible to seek confidential help (Logan et al., 2004). Even when rural women are able to or willing to seek the formal help that they need, service providers reported being understaffed and as a result services are inadequate (Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007). While it is reported that crisis lines are used similarly between rural and urban women (Shannon et al., 2006), rural women also indicated that they are hesitant to call local crisis lines as a family member or friend may be on staff (Coyer et al., 2006). For rural women, confidentiality is clearly a very influential barrier to seeking help, and when paired with their fears of stigma and their lack of knowledge about domestic abuse, these women face very difficult decisions, which reduce their likelihood of seeking help. Not only is the use of formal resources limited when acceptability and confidentiality concerns are considered, there are also issues with isolation and lack of priority. While

deciding to leave an abusive partner is a complicated decision to make for anyone being abused, rural women are certainly facing various unique challenges for accessing resources.

While having resources available to them is critical, the importance of the women's perspectives of helpfulness of the resources has begun to emerge as a critical area to explore (Hall Smith et al., 2010). Hall Smith et al. (2010) identified that this question was lacking from their research and indicated that this information could be instrumental in assessing battered women's decisions to seek support. Shannon et al. (2006) found that rural women perceived the criminal justice system to be significantly less helpful than urban women and women's shelters to be more helpful. Similar themes have been found with previous studies, reporting negative attitudes from women in rural American communities about the criminal justice system and police (Grama, 2000; Logan et al., 2004). Marriage counselling was rated the lowest for perceived helpfulness for both rural and urban women (Shannon et al., 2006). As noted earlier, rural women often receive advice to try and make the marriage work due to societal beliefs in their communities (Eastman et al., 2007). Any perceived limitations are vital for professionals to be aware of in order to implement strategies and resources that the women consider to work and avoid those that do not (Hall Smith et al., 2010).

Kulkarni, Bell, and McDaniel Rhodes (2012) interviewed survivors of domestic abuse, as well as advocates about what qualities they identified in helpful resources. Participants' responses provided four thematic categories: providing empathy, supporting empowerment, individualized care, and maintaining ethical boundaries (Kulkarni et al., 2012). The sense of empowerment stemmed from the women to make decisions about

the steps they would take (Kulkarni et al., 2012). The ethical boundaries were mostly related to confidentiality and anonymity (Kulkarni et al., 2012). As previously discussed, the ethical boundaries of privacy is an area that rural survivors of abuse are strongly concerned about and must be considered a major issue amongst service providers. Factors that were identified as diminishing the quality of services for abused women were burnout of service providers, inadequacy of resources, limited training of staff, and weak integration with other community services (Kulkarni et al., 2012).

  Shelters. A study by Logan et al. (2004) obtained a sample of 97 rural women who had experienced domestic abuse; only 4% of these women used a shelter. The rural women reported that shelters are difficult to access due to there being so few, resulting in them "always being full" (Logan et al., 2004, p. 43).

  Several studies indicated that there are differences amongst women who use shelters and those who do not and the way in which they utilize shelter services. Grossman and Lundy (2011) compared women who used shelters to those who did not while experiencing domestic abuse. Grossman and Lundy's study was completed across approximately 70 shelters in the Illinois area. One factor that is not directly related to a characteristic of the women themselves is that shelter workers must make decisions about which women are more in need of a bed at that time. This decision is based on vulnerability, demographics, and abuse experiences. Grossman and Lundy found that women who are using shelters are less likely be working or have less education, thereby limiting their employment opportunities. Grossman and Lundy's study uncovered that women using shelters are also more likely to be single, suggesting that this relationship status makes it easier to leave domestic abuse compared to women who are married.

Having children was not a determinant of whether women would use a shelter; however, women were more likely to be pregnant when first arriving at a shelter.

Krishnan, Hilbert, McNeil, and Newman (2004) were interested in the different needs of women leaving abuse and using shelters based on their intentions upon departure. Krishnan et al. (2004) developed three groups based on what the women planned on doing once they left the shelter: nonreturn, return, and unknown. These authors found that women who were using the shelter as a form of respite and planned to return to their abusive partners reported higher suicidality, used formal resources less, and indicated higher alcohol use (Krishnan et al., 2004). Women returning to abusive partners had a stronger sense of hopelessness and lacked perception of social support. Krishnan et al. (2004) suggested that shelters need to consider the intentions of women using shelters upon their departure in order to offer the most appropriate and effective support and services.

Counselling. Despite the benefits of counselling for women who have left abusive relationships, this service is often underutilized (Henning & Klesges, 2002). There are some barriers to counselling that apply to the general rural population that are exacerbated for women in abusive relationships. Counselling services, like other resources, are not always geographically accessible to rural women (Adler, 1996). In addition to a shortage of counselling services available to rural women, these women also reported that feelings of shame and fear deter them from seeking this service (Adler, 1996). Due to the lack of confidentiality for many residents of rural communities, women in abusive situations are hesitant to seek counselling services (Helbok, 2003). Counsellors working in rural areas recognized the barrier of dual roles. Residents of rural

populations often take on multiple roles in their communities outside of their profession (Helbok, 2003). Further, it is not as simple as avoiding the multiple roles since this is often an expectation of community members; therefore, avoiding involvement may foster distrust (Jameson & Blank, 2007).

Henning and Klesges (2002) looked more specifically at particular characteristics of women who had left domestic abuse, which seemed to indicate that these women were more likely to use counselling. Henning and Klesges gathered information by interviewing women who recently had a partner enter jail with domestic abuse charges. The women in the study had all experienced physical abuse from their incarcerated partners (Henning & Klesges, 2002). Older women with higher socioeconomic statuses were more likely to seek counselling than younger women with a lower socioeconomic status. Further, women who had experienced more severe incidents of domestic abuse or had experienced sexual assault by partners were more likely to seek counselling services than women who had not experienced this.

Religion. Clergy members are considered to be respected members of the community who are dependable for advice (Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005). There has been some debate as to whether this is an appropriate resource for women seeking help for domestic abuse issues. Shannon-Lewy and Dull (2005) reviewed the literature on religious leaders' responses to domestic violence and considered a number of themes including benefits and liabilities, types of advice, and training. Shannon-Lewy and Dull concluded that many religious leaders were unaware of the breadth of domestic abuse issues or how to handle them. Religious leaders commonly advised that the woman go back to her husband, forgive him, and seek marriage counselling (Pagelow, as cited in

Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005). However, recent research has suggested that church involvement, particularly attendance, is a protective factor in domestic abuse (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007). Postmus, Severson, Berry, and Yoo (2009) found that religious or spiritual counselling was among the three services reported to be used by women leaving domestic abuse. This type of support was found to be quite helpful to the women. This finding is significant because it suggests that religion plays a strong role in the lives of rural women and that they are more likely than urban women to be religious (England & Finch, 1991; Mitchell & Weatherly, 2000). Further, Thurston and Meadows (2004) stated there is a strong spiritual association to the promotion of health for rural Canadian women. Research appears to be contradictory in some aspects when considering the link between religion and domestic abuse. It is unclear whether it is a hindrance or a helpful resource to turn to.

Informal resources. Researchers reported a number of informal resources or coping mechanisms that battered women tend to use (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Hage, 2006; Hall Smith et al., 2010; Logan et al., 2003, 2007; Shannon et al., 2006). Hage (2006) studied the development of agency in women who have endured domestic violence and found five major themes that are comprised of coping mechanisms for enduring abuse and risk factors of the abuse. These include supportive relationships, internal strength and spirituality, self-agency, feeling trapped, and previous abuse experiences (Hage, 2006).

Hall Smith et al. (2010) identified family and friend supports as emotion-focused, interpersonal coping but also indicated the importance of the women's perceived support from these people. A study by Bosch and Bergen (2006) reported that 33.9% of the

women participants identified their mothers as the most supportive person in their lives when leaving abusive situations. Sullivan (as cited in Bosch & Bergen, 2006) defined a supportive person as one who provides a variety of assistance: informational, physical, and emotional. Bosch and Bergen (2006) identified an unsupportive person as one who fails to protect a person from the abuse. Unsupportive networks would be apparent in such actions as ignoring the abuse or encouraging the women to make the relationship work against all odds (Bosch & Bergen, 2006). Bosch and Bergen (2006) indicated the majority of women who are in abusive relationships have less social support than women in healthy relationships.

Many abused women described themselves as isolated, whether due to the abuser cutting off relationships or making it physically difficult for the woman to leave the home (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Hage, 2006). Rural women have further difficulties in maintaining relationships due to geographic isolation. In Logan et al.'s (2003) study, only one of the eight rural women reported speaking to a friend about the abuse in contrast to eight of the 15 urban women. Responses from rural women about how they cope with the abuse portray much more despair and loneliness than urban women (Logan et al., 2003). Urban women's responses included, "Reading information on abusive situations and co-dependence" (Logan et al., 2003, p. 86), while rural women responded with, "[I] thought about killing myself with pills but didn't" (p. 86). Emotional support, defined as reaffirming that the abuse is unacceptable and supporting all decision making, has been found to be the most effective type of support, thereby making supportive interpersonal relationships very important (Bosch & Bergen, 2006). Since rural women

worry about judgment (Logan et al., 2004), having emotional support from a nonjudgmental person could be vital in making the decision to leave.

While the rural women indicated that they worry about confidentiality, Eastman et al. (2007) also found that many seemed more comfortable with receiving services, such as counselling in group settings. Levendosky et al. (2004) also found women will talk more frequently about their experience of domestic violence with other women who have experienced it, which, in a sense limits their social support. Another limitation to having social supports that largely consist of battered women is the depression and self-depreciation that these women are experiencing, which may result in criticism toward others (Levendosky et al., 2004). However, the sense of not being alone in their situation was a comforting change from the isolated feelings usually associated with abusive relationships (Eastman et al., 2007).

Hall Smith et al. (2010) examined battered women's methods of coping. Coping is defined as "any attempt to neutralize stress arousal" (Girdano, Dusek, & Everlyas, as cited in Hall Smith et al., 2010, p. 19). There were four types of coping identified: (a) emotion focused/interpersonal, (b) emotion focused/intrapersonal, (c) problem focused/interpersonal, and (d) problem focused/intrapersonal (Hall Smith et al., 2010). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the concept of problem- and emotion-focused strategies. Battered women use a combination of these strategies, dependent on the context of the situation (Hall Smith et al., 2010). Emotion-focused coping strategies, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, include taking blame, spirituality, substance abuse, and support from friends and family (Hall Smith et al., 2010). Evidently, strategies in this category can be both healthy and unhealthy and there are many more intrapersonal

coping mechanisms reported than interpersonal (Hall Smith et al., 2010). The problem-focused coping strategies included active planning, standing ground, retaliation, formal help seeking, and seeking shelter (Hall Smith et al., 2010). While D'Zurilla and Nezu (as cited in Hall Smith et al., 2010) suggested that problem-focused coping is the more adaptive option, Hall Smith et al. suggested that some problem-focused strategies could be problematic and sometimes dangerous for women in abusive relationships. For example, women standing their ground or retaliating could be put in a potentially harmful situation. One woman described trying to leave her partner and stand up for herself, only to be brought into her house at gunpoint (Hall Smith et al., 2010). Further, retaliation may end up more extreme than expected. One woman spoke about threatening to stab her partner (Hall Smith et al., 2010). This type of incident may lead to criminal charges against the woman if she follows through on threats.

According Hall Smith et al. (2010), the intrapersonal coping was more prominent for rural women, suggesting that they have become accustomed to coping alone. Since it has been identified that social support is vital for anyone in abusive situations (Bosch & Bergen, 2006), rural women's restrictions that result in intrapersonal coping alone needs to be addressed. Further, considering rural women have even less access to social and formal supports due to geographical isolation, having to rely on oneself can be an imperative issue to assess, especially considering the potential dangers identified with some problem-focused strategies.

Shannon et al. (2006) explored the types of coping strategies used by both urban and rural abused women and how the strategies are related to help-seeking strategies. Of the women who took part in Shannon et al.'s study, 91% reported using an emotion-

focused coping strategy such as avoidance, positive appraisal, or wishful thinking. While Shannon et al. reported no significant differences between rural and urban women for utilization of coping strategies, they did find that significantly more urban women seek emotional support, use positive self-talk, and exercise or meditation as coping strategies than did the rural women. Rural women, however, were found to be more likely to use denial as a coping strategy for dealing with violence (Shannon et al., 2006). While all of these strategies are found in the emotion-focused category, the rural women's approaches are more problematic. Battered women utilize significantly more help seeking resources when they use problem-focused coping strategies (Shannon et al., 2006). Despite the lack of difference in coping strategies, which are linked to rate of help seeking, rural women reported using significantly less help-seeking resources than urban women, which could possibly be accounted for by lack of accessibility (Shannon et al., 2006). This would imply that while many rural women want to find help, they are simply not able to acquire it (Shannon et al., 2006).

Battered women generally become isolated due to their circumstances, however, rural women become further isolated due to fears of stigmatization from family and friends as well as a result of the geographical isolation of their towns and homes. This isolation has a strong impact on the woman's ability to maintain supportive relationships and, therefore, they must attempt to use more intrapersonal coping mechanisms and rely on themselves in order to survive the abuse.

Leaving the Abuse

People often ask, "Why do women stay in abusive relationships? They should just leave." In many cases, women in abusive relationships live in fear that their partner

will threaten to kill them, kill themselves, or kill the children (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2011). Even when women do manage to leave, they are not necessarily safe. Statistics Canada (2011a) found 26% of all women who have been killed by their partner had left the relationship. Through interviewing survivors, R. E. Davis (2002) provided a number of reasons as to why women could not leave right away: (a) abusers often degrade the women and create feelings of isolation; (b) women are socially isolated and in some cases geographically isolated; (c) women are committed to the relationship and may have even tried therapy; and (d) women may lack financial resources, housing, or both. However, when the abuse begins to affect their children's lives, the women take action (Davis, 2002). Even though the majority of the women in this study were professionals, all of the participants reported a lack of social support and services, as well as reported strong feelings of shame.

The main themes that emerged from R. E. Davis's (2002) study were timing, support, services, and intuition. When all of these were in place the women were able to safely leave the abuse. Intuition, not as commonly identified in research as the other themes, refers to the women's ability to sense when violent episodes were going to occur and to judge the best time to take action (Davis, 2002). Further to the lack of support and services, Koepsell, Kernic, and Holt (2006) found that women who have not left an abusive relationship were more likely to have attempted to access the food bank, social security, or seek assistance with employment, housing, and transportation but were unsuccessful in their attempts. Although women attempt to take steps to leave an abusive relationship, they may not have the support or necessities in order to do so. Koepesell et al. (2006) completed their study in an urban area, and from this I speculate that obtaining

these previously mentioned necessary services would be even more difficult in rural areas.

Finally, leaving an abusive relationship is one thing, not going back is something else entirely. In fact, Koepsell et al. (2006) found that 22.4% of women who had left an abusive relationship had done so six or more times. The woman's process of leaving an abusive relationship can be influenced by the social context (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). In rural communities women who want to leave or who are successful in leaving an abusive partner struggle with creating and maintaining separation from the partner (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Therefore, not only is successfully leaving an abusive relationship an important process for service providers to understand but also helping women maintain the decision is vital.

In trying to understand the process and experience of leave taking and maintaining this choice, Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) discussed "reclaiming self" (p. 115), which they defined as "a prolonged, iterative, social-psychological process of reinstatement of self within the larger social context of family and community beliefs, norms, resources, and services" (pp. 115–116). Not going back is one of the four steps to reclaiming self. Two subprocesses have been identified within this: claiming and maintaining territory and relentless justifying. Finding a place of their own and getting situated is a major step for survivors of abuse, especially those with children. Family and friends who enforce and maintain boundaries and limits often help the abused woman to establish a safe place to live. In rural communities the women must be very cautious and often have to learn to live with the fear of retaliation from their previous partner (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

Women who are successful at leaving abusive relationships then have to deal with constantly justifying to others and to themselves that it was the right choice (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). In rural communities, an often-held belief is that marriage is a lifelong commitment and the woman should always try to make it work. In addition to defending this choice to others, in order for these women to receive formal help such as emergency income assistance, they must complete many forms and meet many criteria, which ultimately labels the woman (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Finally, women who have left abusive relationships and remain in rural areas are constantly aware that society labels them as a victim and the public knows that they have left the relationship (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). This labelling leads the woman to constantly consider her actions and choices, which are likely under the scrutiny of the town (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

The literature revealed common themes for when and why women are able to leave abusive relationships. Timing, resources, and social supports all impact how long a woman stays in an abusive environment. While there has been some research on the barriers that abused women face (Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001; Logan et al., 2003; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002), there has been minimal research into the experience of actually leaving abusive relationships in rural contexts. The social support and lack of access to resources in rural communities also needs to be explored further in order to educate the population on the reality of abuse as well as to establish more resources where needed.

Conclusion

In Canada 83% of all domestic assaults reported to police are against women (Statistics Canada, 2011c). This trend is consistent across all provinces and territories. Police in Canada make over 40,000 domestic abuse related arrests each year, and it is suggested that only 22% of all incidents are reported (Statistics Canada, 2011c). This leaves an astounding and terrifying number of women who are abused and not receiving help. Although research has identified numerous barriers that women face in seeking help for domestic violence and the research around rural women has also expanded, more insight into rural women's perceptions is still needed. Determining what is preventing rural women from seeking help for domestic violence is imperative in order to aid communities and professionals in developing the right resources. Specifically, more insight into the rural women's fear of stigma and worry of acceptability surrounding reporting domestic abuse and seeking help is important. This issue could also be addressed by educating the general public about intimate partner violence. Providing the general public with information about the experiences of survivors could help to stop people from asking questions such as, "Why don't they just leave," and instead ask, "How can I help?" Logan et al. (2004) suggested that the fear of judgment from family, friends, and the community might be a detrimental challenge faced by rural women, preventing them from seeking services. Further, the perceived helpfulness of already available resources could be profoundly insightful as to why women use or do not use particular resources.

In this study, I conducted personal, in-depth interviews to uncover these essential insights from the women who actively deal with or have dealt with these challenges.

Findings could help to change professionals' approaches to helping rural, battered women. The goal would be to give women who have endured domestic abuse the most positive, effectual, and supportive experience possible throughout the process of escaping abuse and building a better life.

Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the approach that will be taken to explore rural women's stories of abuse. I will provide information of the interviewing process that will take place, the underlying theories, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study used narrative inquiry to explore rural women's experiences with seeking help for domestic abuse. I strove to uncover these women's perceptions through their stories about the barriers they endured at that time and the supports available to them. The purpose of this study was to understand what changes and improvements need to be made in rural settings to best aid women in abusive relationships.

The overarching research question posed was: What challenges do women in rural communities face when seeking help for domestic abuse? Secondary questions included:

1. What formal and informal resources did they draw on for support to leave the abusive relationship?

2. What social supports did participants identify as helpful when leaving abusive relationships?

3. What was the perceived impact of social and felt stigma on their decisions to leave?

4. What strengths did the survivors recognize within themselves that helped them to leave the abusive environment?

In this chapter I discuss the use of qualitative research, more specifically, in-depth interviews that I used to learn about rural women's experiences leaving abusive relationships. I describe the use of narrative inquiry with an underlying social constructivist approach. I also detail the recruitment of participants, the interviewing process, the ethical considerations of this study, as well as the process of analysis and interpretation.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a system of inquiry that seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher's understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon. Qualitative research typically takes place in natural settings, respects the humanity of participants through the choice of methods, considers context, is emerging and evolving, and is interpretive in nature (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative researchers view social environments as complex and holistic and data collection approaches are used to develop concepts and theories that help researchers to understand the social world of participants. Data analysis and collection are iterative. Researchers must code data into categories that emerge from the interviews, using words and phrases that capture a particular theme (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

Reflexivity enhances the quality of the qualitative processes and outcomes and increases sensitivity to informants' concerns (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). There are four reflexive strategies that are described in qualitative research; here I identify the two I considered to be important for my research. The first is reflexivity as recognition of self. As the researcher, I needed to be self-reflexive and aware of my own subjectivity. Second, there is reflexivity as recognition of others, which is important for validating and legitimizing qualitative research. Pillow (2003) described this format of reflexivity as capturing the essence of the participants rather than simply collecting data. Overall, reflexivity enhances the quality of research in a number of ways. Reflexivity aids in examining the impact the researcher makes on the interaction, identifies unconscious motivations and biases through the researcher's responses and approaches, and also empowers others and allows for public scrutiny of the integrity of the research (Finlay,

2002). For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was an excellent fit, as my intent was to hear each woman's individual story in the context of her life and environment.

Hill (2012) offered a description of the key features of qualitative research as designated by various qualitative researchers:

- numbers are replaced by words;

- researchers are in and of themselves the instruments used for analyzing data— they interpret and judge the information;

- qualitative research focuses on natural phenomena rather than manipulated situations or environments;

- inductive strategies are utilized—researchers allow results to emerge;

- researchers listen to the viewpoint of the participants;

- context is considered essential in understanding behaviours and events;

- people's experiences are the result of complex origins, and researchers must consider many factors;

- the process generates ideas rather than facts; and

- the emergence of theory is emphasized in qualitative research rather than imposing theories onto data.

These key points really give a succinct idea of what qualitative research looks like and how it differs from quantitative research. Qualitative research values the personal aspect of the data and makes the experience more socially and emotionally based for the researcher. In interviewing women about their experiences of leaving abusive relationships and seeking help, I recognized the uniqueness of each story, and I was

interested in the social phenomena that occurred. The social phenomena I am referring to here, is the way in which the women chose to tell me their stories. Considering the manner in which they told me, as well as what they chose to include, and the overall tone of the interview. I approached their stories with the intent of letting themes and ideas emerge from my data rather than imposing my own ideas and beliefs onto the women's stories. I attempted to clear my mind when listening to and analyzing the interviews in order to avoid any expectations of what I would hear. I made sure to make notes and to include anything that emerged despite any preconceived notions I had about themes. The numerous influences that were present in the women's stories made the research complex. As a result, qualitative research was the appropriate approach to develop understanding (Richards & Morse, 2002).

Qualitative interviewing is actually quite similar to regular conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). However, in order to hear the meaning in what was being said, other skills are required. Researchers use planned agendas because they seek detailed, thick descriptions of a story (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Researchers use questioning skills that stem from the main question to probe for further details while continuously maintaining rapport (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When doing this type of research, investigators must realize they are ultimately entering into the personal lives of participants and must be sensitive to participants' willingness to share (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is an in-depth qualitative method that suggests people live "storied" lives and that researchers can analyze these stories to answer questions about

particular populations and social issues (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Goodson and Gill (2011) provided a definition of narratives, formed by Hinchman and Hinchman (as cited in Goodson & Gill, 2011), that focused on the social interaction present in the story and how the experiences are transferred to meaning for the individual. This definition of narratives includes three features: (a) temporality—all experiences involve a sequence of events; (b) meaning—the meaning and personal experience of the storyteller are exposed during the narrative; and (c) social encounter—stories are told to an audience and are ultimately shaped by the context of the relationship between the storyteller and listener (Goodson & Gill, 2011). I kept these definitions in mind, which helped me to focus on the story, how it was being told, and the meaning placed on it. I think that the third point about the social encounter makes it clear that, as a researcher, I influenced the way in which participants told their stories and that the relationship I attempted to build with them was important. Since the women had an idea about the direction of my study and had the interview questions beforehand this could have impacted how they told the story. There is also the possibility that when my interest was piqued by something that the women said, it could have been apparent in my responses, therefore, encouraging the participant to continue or expand.

Social constructivism is the basic underlying foundation of narrative research (Moen, 2006). The basic tenets of social constructivism are that people grow and develop through social interactions and that society has a continual influence through a person's life. Similar to the previous definition of narrative research by Hinchman and Hinchman (as cited in Goodson & Gill, 2011), Moen (2006) suggested that there are three underlying principles of narrative research: (a) people turn their life experiences into

narratives; (b) there are a number of factors involved in how the narratives and the meaning are developed that include the person's values, the audience, and the environment; and (c) narrators have multiple voices that are shaped by the different influences in their lives.

Fraser (2004) discussed seven phases to help guide researchers through the narrative research process: (a) hearing the stories and experiencing emotions, (b) transcribing, (c) interpreting individual interviews, (d) considering all different domains of the stories, (e) connecting the personal and political, (f) finding similarities between participant stories, and (g) writing academic narratives to represent the stories. While qualitative research is less structured than quantitative research, Fraser's phases provided me with a sense of direction in conducting my study.

The narrative approach requires a sense of trust between the researcher and the participant in order for the participant to feel comfortable in telling her story. Goodson and Gill (2011) suggested that this sense of trust needs to be developed before beginning the actual interviewing, and this can be partially gained through discussion with the client in order to collaboratively decide on the interview process. This process in part meant that I let the participants know that they were in charge of the interview, we could stop and take a break at any time. I also let the women decide whether or not they wanted to use a pseudonym throughout the interview, as it became clear after the first interview that they may feel more comfortable using their own name while we spoke. In the event that they chose to use their own name during the interview, the pseudonym was applied during transcription. Sikes (2010) pointed out that the stories researchers hear in interviews may not be exactly what happened, as participants make decisions and choices

about what to include. From a social constructivist perspective, I believe that researchers need to be aware of this but also respectful of the details a participant includes and the means by which she tells it because this is her story and meaning is created through her ability to talk about it.

Fraser (2004) noted, "Stories are used to construct our lived realities" (p. 196). Through narrative research I was able to give previously abused women a chance to express their lived reality through storytelling in order to understand the environment and social contexts of their situation. Keeping in mind that each woman's experience is going to be unique with various factors involved, narrative inquiry is a qualitative method that allows for themes and influences to arise that I may not have considered (Richards & Morse, 2002).

Narrative inquiry gives the participant a voice and validates what was meaningful for her. This approach has been found especially useful for exploring one's experience of trauma and violence (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). An interesting concept of narrative research is that it sometimes allows for the storyteller to release information or thoughts that were not in their awareness (Sinclair Bell, 2002). The narrative approach seems to allow for a somewhat cathartic experience for the participant. Sharing her story and perceptions in a safe, confidential environment can be an empowering experience. As a researcher and future counsellor, I wanted these women to realize their strengths and resources through their stories. While finding positive aspects, it is important that researchers are shedding light on the social and economical challenges such as higher rates of unemployment and poverty faced by that population (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003).

Theoretical Lens

When completing this research and in the analysis, I took into account both feminist theory and relational cultural theory. By looking through the lens of each approach I was able to bring together the views of the rural women and the service providers in a manner that represented the uniqueness of the situations and of each individual experience.

Feminist theory. Marshall (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011) stated that feminist perspectives "uncover cultural and institutional sources and forces of oppression. They name and value women's subjective experiences" (p. 27). Feminist research looks to understand the lives of women and other oppressed groups and involves issues of social change (Hesse-Biber, 2006). Participants in feminist research are represented in how the researcher interprets and presents the findings. However, these researchers are aware of the power and authority that exists in this role and become mindful of their own views, adopting reflexivity as an integral component of research (Hesse-Biber, 2006).

K. Davis, Taylor, and Furniss (2001) described feminist research as studies "with women for women" (p. 336). Feminist research processes place emphasis on the individual, real experiences of women. In feminist research, the investigator works to develop caring relationships with participants and provide women with the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Throughout my interviews I was quite aware of the fact that I was a young female who had not been in an abusive relationship, therefore to some extent I could not relate to the women's stories. Overall this often made me consider the way in which I behaved or

responded in the interviews. A prime example of this comes from my interview with Janice. After the interview I noted,

> Janice spoke of being tired of having people pity her, she had a less than positive experience with one of her counsellors who she described as a young white girl who had no idea of what she had gone through. Janice did not feel that she could continue counselling with someone who had not experienced abuse. These statements from Janice made me aware of my own role and experiences and very conscious of my comments and reactions throughout the interview.

In feminist research the interview is viewed more as a conversation, with the researcher and interviewee becoming coparticipants (Hesse-Biber, 2006). Hesse-Biber (2006) suggested that while there may be an interview guide, it is important for the questions to flow naturally from the conversation, emphasizing the role of listening for the researcher.

Feminist theory developed from a desire to break patterns of masculine domination in the realm of research (Hughes, 2002). Hughes (2002) identified three main elements related to the argument that the existing masculine frameworks were not adequate. First, sociological research tended to exclude women. Secondly, feminist research is based on a collaborative, inclusive relationship between the researcher and participant, rather than viewing the participant as an external object. The third and final element identified was the idea that researchers should be building rapport with participants, considering their emotions, outside interests, and unconscious beliefs during the research. Feminist researchers are considered to be at the forefront in examining the concepts that are the result of a patriarchal lens on social reality that impede women and other minorities (Leavy, 2006).

Relational cultural theory. Relational cultural theory (RCT) arose from a group of feminist counsellors who identified the importance of paying attention to experience (West, 2005). Judith Jordan (2010), one of the core therapists involved in the development of RCT, identified a number of the key concepts. A disconnection develops in relationships "when one person misunderstands, invalidates, excludes, humiliates, or injures the other person in some way" (Jordan, 2010, p. 25). The person who is injured becomes the less powerful person in the relationship and if they are not given the chance to express this hurt, they will learn to suppress that component of the experience. The injured person will then become inauthentic in the relationship, moulding herself to be acceptable to the other in the relationship (Jordan, 2010). Once a person begins to experience disempowerment, disconnection ensues and the injured person will experience shame and place blame on herself. While this sense of disempowerment is occurring on a personal level, it contributes to the conversation of the politics of dominance—the personal becomes political. When discussing RCT, Collins (as cited in Jordan, 2009) described "controlling images" (p. 30), which are images created by society to disempower particular groups of people (Jordan, 2010, p. 102). Collins noted that these images are like stereotypes, in that their purpose is to keep people in their place, creating the belief that change is not possible.

In discussing RCT, Jordan (2010) further described the impact of shame. Shame occurs naturally in those who believe their being is unworthy, and shame is inflicted on people in order to control and disempower them. Shame silences and isolates individuals, particularly marginalized groups. When considering the impact of shame it is important to recognize that there are generally multiple sources of shame for an

individual. Proponents of RCT suggest that shame and oppression are present in dyadic relationships, particularly abusive situations in which the abuser will often shame and isolate the victim of violence. Being aware of the shame and oppression that these women could have experienced in their abusive relationships impacted how I interacted with them in the interviews. I was constantly aware of my reactions and responses to the women's stories. In the interviews I attempted to bring focus to the strengths and success of the women during their journey. My approach to the research was one of empowerment and attempting to understand the stigma that developed during the abuse. This is closely related to the RCT notion that shame and oppression develops in abusive situations in that this study focused on the impact the leaving of abuse had on the women.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research takes place in order to describe experiences from the participant's point of view, and the researcher's role is to listen to her story (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Ethical considerations arise from this type of research and require special attention (Burkard, Knox, & Hill, 2012). Discussing abuse history is identified as a topic vulnerable to ethical challenges (Burkard et al., 2012). Ethical considerations include researcher competence, ongoing informed consent, confidentiality, and participant readiness to disclose (Burkard et al., 2012).

Vulnerable populations. Women have been recognized as a vulnerable population by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [CIHR], 2010). Vulnerability is described as being treated unjustly and having limited access to opportunities and power (CIHR,

2010). Women in general are considered vulnerable populations that were excluded from

the research process for years (CIHR, 2010). Women who have been abused have been

treated in a way that has made them even more vulnerable.

Participants may not realize the extent to which they will begin to disclose in the

interview and it is possible they may begin to feel vulnerable (Burkard et al., 2012). The

following approaches may help deal with these concerns: (a) provide participants with the

interview questions beforehand, (b) recognize at the beginning of the process that intense

emotions may arise, and (c) offer supports and resources to the participants (Burkard et

al., 2012).

The World Health Organization (WHO) developed ethical and safety

recommendations for conducting research on domestic violence (Ellsberg & Heise,

2002). The safety of both the participant and researcher is vital (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002).

The researcher must take the appropriate steps to reduce distress in the participants

throughout the study (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). WHO also recommended that researchers

minimize physical and emotional harm and maximize benefits by building the study to

help the immediate participants as well as the relevant population (Ellsberg & Heise,

2002). Although the nature of qualitative research makes it difficult to predict what

would occur during the data collection phase, I was aware of the possibility of triggering

painful memories and causing distress (Orb et al., 2001). This was especially important

to be aware of when interviewing women who had been abused; for this reason I

provided participants with resources for counselling should they require it. Hutchinson,

Wilson, and Wilson (1994) also discussed possible benefits of this type of research,

which include (a) catharsis, (b) validation of self, (c) sense of purpose, (d) increased self-

awareness, (e) empowerment, (f) sense of healing, and (g) giving a voice to those who have not had one.

Ellsberg and Heise (2002) suggested that the interview can sometimes become similar to an intervention for some participants. When women discuss domestic violence for the purpose of research, they may be disclosing their story for the first time (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). WHO's recommendations encapsulated the basic ethical considerations that I needed to be aware of as a novice researcher attempting to interview women on an emotionally sensitive topic and were very helpful for completing research with vulnerable populations safely and respectfully.

Due to the nature of the participants' backgrounds and the topic of the research, maintaining the anonymity and safety of the participants was an important part of this research (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). All participants were given pseudonyms for transcription and the dissemination of my results. When choosing a location for interviews, I made a strong attempt to select a safe, private location that was not isolated (Moen, 2006; Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). This helped to ensure participants' safety and my safety as well. I did not make direct contact with the participants at their home to ensure their anonymity and safety. I made initial contact with the participants through the shelter and then established a safe way to contact them to schedule interviews. The shelter workers that the women contacted when they were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact me via telephone or email in a way that was safe for them. At this point, I asked the women if this would be the best way to contact them in the future. When I communicated with the participants it was important that I established a rapport with them as a researcher, ensuring that I did not cross the line to counsellor

(Murray, 2003). By preparing specific probes to accompany my interview questions and ensuring that I practiced the planned interview guide I was able to be aware of the tone and direction that I took to guide the interview as the researcher. I wanted the women to feel comfortable talking to me; while upholding ethical requirements, I wished to provide support in a way that helped them to tell their story.

Participants were debriefed after each session and reminded of the contact information that was provided for counselling services if required. Participants were thanked for their time and contribution, and again I pointed out the researcher contact information on the informed consent form and explained that participants could contact me at anytime if concerns arose for them. I gave all participants pseudonyms and I password-protected all to ensure anonymity and confidentiality requirements were met. I also informed the participants that after I had completed the transcribing and analysis I would contact them for feedback on my interpretation if they were willing to take part. A transcriber and I transcribed the interviews and stored the typed hard copies of the transcripts in a locked briefcase; again, this was done to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

Concerning the researcher. Novice researchers must learn qualitative research skills including developing the interview, responding to difficulties that arise, and data analysis (Burkard et al., 2012). I have learned many of these skills in my studies through courses on research methods and qualitative research, as well as counselling skills courses. The pilot study gave me the chance to explore potential difficulties that could arise during the interview and gave me an opportunity to prepare for conducting the actual research. Conducting a pilot study allowed me to experience how participants may

or may not respond to the questions that I posed and how I was able to react. This was also an opportunity for me to reflect with the participant and receive feedback on the formation and tone of the interview.

Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) remind researchers to consider the impact that qualitative research, which focuses on sensitive topics, can have on the researcher—physically and emotionally. Dickson-Swift et al. suggested informal supports such as family and friends can soften the impact, but also recommended debriefing with a supervisor. Self-care is vital during qualitative research. To avoid burnout and emotional distress, researchers can debrief, schedule breaks, and receive counselling (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). I made a strong effort to have good self-care throughout the research process, maintaining contact with my support system and my supervisor, as well as utilizing a personal counsellor when necessary. One way in which I made sure I was dealing with the experience of hearing the participants' stories in a healthy way was travelling with a friend to and from my interviews. It was helpful to have a supportive person to debrief my reactions to the interviews after they were completed. While doing this I maintained ethical boundaries by concentrating only on my reactions to what rural women are facing in abusive relationships without revealing the specific details about the women's stories or identities.

Participants

The purpose of the study was to understand women's experiences and to gather data from their stories rather than through numbers. Rather than use random sampling, as is often done with quantitative research, I used purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is usually the approach used for choosing participants for qualitative research in order to ensure relevant stories are provided that answer the posed questions (Polkinghorne, 2005). Finding participants who are willing to share "information rich" stories can sometimes be a difficult task (Polkinghorne, 2005). Participants were chosen for their story and what they could contribute to the research questions rather than the statistical significance of data (CIHR, 2010).

In an attempt to recruit participants for this study, I contacted various agencies across Alberta. I spoke to staff at women's shelters and at walk-in clinics. I conversed with counsellors, researchers, and various boards and asked for help to advertise my study. I provided each of these agencies with a thesis summary (see Appendix A), advertisement (see Appendix B), and ethical approval (see Appendix C). Many agencies complied and were able to advertise and attempt recruitment in various ways on my behalf; unfortunately, this approach was not successful in recruiting participants in the time frame expected. After several months of advertising for participants, the decision was made to open the study to service providers as well. I again approached many of my previous contacts and asked if they would be willing to take part in the study as participants.

Participant selection. To be considered for participation in this study the following criteria had to be met. The woman must have left an abusive relationship at least 30 days prior, have lived in a rural community at the time of the abuse, and have been 18 years of age or older in order to give consent as an adult. I limited the participants to those who have been out of the abusive relationship for at least 30 days for

the purpose of safety and stability. Women currently in abusive relationships would still be at risk and were not considered due to safety issues to both the participants and the researcher. Service providers were also required to be 18 years of age or older, to work or to have worked in a rural community, and to provide a service to women leaving domestic abuse.

I based recruitment from rural communities on Statistics Canada's definition of a "rural and small town" (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1)—an area outside of CMAs and CAs. The rural status was vital in that my research aimed at understanding barriers faced by this particular population of abused women.

Participant recruitment. I considered at length how to best find participants for this study. I believed that rural women's shelters and other similar agencies would be able to contact women who have used their facility and met the criteria of the study. The shelters were asked to advertise the study with a poster as well as to consider contacting potential participants to provide them with my contact information. I provided details about the research, the goals, and questions I wished to answer, and the process by which I would be interviewing to all agencies. When considering the best approach for recruitment for this study, I had to consider the confidentiality and anonymity of the women. I realized that there were few locations that were appropriate for advertising the study; I was limited to places such as women's shelters and health clinics. It also became apparent during this process that reaching out to rural areas has barriers, and that there are few safe locations where women could respond to advertisements for projects similar to my study. Due to these barriers it was also apparent that when looking at this type of population, extra time is required for the recruitment process.

Upon contact from potential participants, I then reviewed the details of the study with the individual, including the process of informed consent, participant roles, and potential contributions to research and practice. In an effort to promote participant safety and comfort, I made decisions collaboratively with the participants to decide where it would be best to conduct interviews. I informed the participants that I needed to record the interviews; however, their participation would be anonymous throughout the process. A copy of the informed consent for the rural women can be found in Appendix D and the informed consent for the service providers in Appendix E.

Rural women who left domestic abuse. I recruited participants from rural communities in southern and central Alberta. There were three rural women who volunteered to be interviewed for this study; they have been given the names Sarah, Tanya, and Janice. The women ranged in age from mid-40s to mid-50s. The amount of time since they had left their abusive relationships ranged from 9 months to 6 years. The communities in which the women were living when the abuse occurred ranged in size. Sarah lived in a community of approximately 1,000 people while Janice was from a larger town of approximately 61,000, but spent most of her life on a reserve. Tanya lived on a quarter section that was approximately 37 minutes from a town of 8,200; the closest village had a population of approximately 800 people. Due to travelling and time constrictions, I interviewed two of the three women via telephone and the other I interviewed in person.

Service providers. There were a total of five service providers who took part in the study who were given the names of Rita, Karen, Kay, Randi, and Tanya. Rita and Karen completed the interview together. They both work at the Women's Shelter in a

town of approximately 61 thousand as the program managers for the emergency shelter and second stage housing. Although Rita and Karen work in a larger size town, the population size still fit the definition of small town. However, the main reason they were asked to participate in the study is that their shelter offers services to many outside, more rural communities. Kay and Randi were also from the same community, a town of approximately 8,000, working respectively as the outreach worker and the crisis team supervisor. Tanya, who also participated as a rural woman who has left abuse, was the outreach worker for a town of approximately 91,000. Again, although Tanya was based out of a larger community, her position was as an outreach worker for the women's shelter. Further, Tanya identified that despite being in a town that would not usually be considered rural, she still faced some of the issues you would expect in small communities.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study in order to assess my interview questions and my approach to the interview process. I made contact with the Lethbridge Young Women's Christian Association, the local women's shelter, to ask for help in contacting a woman who would be willing to participate in this process. The participant in the pilot study met the same requirements as potential participants of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to receive suggestions and reactions on ways in which I could improve my interview. One of the major realizations that I made during the pilot interview was that Skype was not a viable option for future interviews, due to the poor audio quality. It also became clear in the pilot interview that I may not be able to ask questions in the exact order as I had prepared them, especially with the narrative approach. In the telling

of their stories the women often covered many of the questions that I wanted to ask. Further to this, the initial interview helped me to develop probes that would aid me in prompting the women to provide me with more information. I analyzed the interview through content analysis, as was planned for the main data. A sample of the coded transcript can be found in Appendix F. As colours would not be visible upon printing, colours were replaced with different underlines.

Procedures

I obtained ethical approval from the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee prior to beginning this study. At the time of the interview I provided all participants with an informed consent form. I also reminded participants verbally that everything discussed in the interview would be confidential and anonymous. Participants signed one informed consent form and were provided with a copy for their own records. I also informed participants verbally they were permitted to end the interview at any time, could choose not to answer any questions they were not comfortable with, could stop recording at any time in the interview, and they would have 6 weeks after the interview to withdraw their data, if they so chose. The informed consent made it clear that for my research it was necessary for me to audio record the interview. I explained that only a transcriber and I would be listening to the recordings to ensure privacy and anonymity. The transcriber was a university student who has worked as a transcriber for several professors and who also has had experience transcribing for other students' final projects. I also provided contact information for counselling services attached to the informed consent, in case the

participants felt the need to speak to someone about any distressing emotions or thoughts brought up by the interview.

The study consisted of one meeting with each participant, and in some cases it was necessary that I conduct the interview by telephone or Skype (n.d.). One of the rural women was interviewed in person and the other two by telephone. Of the service providers four were interviewed in person and the other via telephone. At the time of the interview I reminded participants that I needed to record the interviews in order to best analyze their narratives. I then asked the participant to tell me her story of leaving her abusive relationship and what challenges she faced. I discussed with her the formal and informal resources that were available or not available, and what supports she felt were available to her. I also inquired about any social and felt stigma that influenced her decisions and whether geographical isolation had been a barrier for her. Recognizing that she is a survivor of abuse, I also addressed the strengths she could identify within herself that helped her to leave the relationship and seek help. This was a narrative inquiry, therefore, as few questions as possible were asked—I was there to learn from the participant. The participant set the flow and pace of the narrative, and I only asked questions for clarification or when I felt that a probe was required to further the story. An interview guide can be found in Appendix G.

For the service providers, the interview questions were slightly reworded in order to conform to their perspective. An interview guide can be found in Appendix H. Although the original plan for the interview was a narrative approach, this did not necessarily fit for service provider for several reasons. The primary reason for this was that service providers were providing information from their experiences, partially

representing the women that they have worked with, therefore, their responses were not as storied. Also, the service providers were more likely to have prepared responses to each of the questions, in part due to having a set amount of time allotted for the interview. Due to these circumstances the interviews tended to emerge in a more structured manner.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) discussed member checks, which I feel are very important to qualitative research. After a transcriber and I transcribed all data, I then analyzed the interviews. I once again contacted the rural women regarding the narrative that I wrote for each of them and asked if they were interested in and willing to read the narrative in order to provide me with feedback to ensure I accurately represented their personal story. In this second interview the intention was to receive feedback from the participants about the experience and to ask if they would like to add anything. I also wanted to check in with each participant regarding my interpretation of the interview as a means of further validating my analysis. Unfortunately, only one of the three rural women participants could be contacted and chose to provide feedback on the narrative that I had written to represent her story The option of reading the narrative gave participants a say in how their voices were portrayed and also enabled participants to point out errors or extra interpretations I may have missed when analyzing their stories. This member-checking process was conducted to ensure that I represented these women's stories as honestly and correctly as possible. Finally, member checking offered me a chance to again contact the women and reconnect under less intense or emotional circumstances, as it was possible that originally sharing their stories may have caused

some distress, and reconnecting with the participants also offered a sense of closure (Rager, 2005).

Analysis and Interpretation

After each interview was completed, memos were taken as thoughts or ideas emerged about each woman's story. The interviews with the rural women were transcribed.

As stated earlier, a transcriber and I transcribed the interviews. I had originally planned on completing all transcribing myself; however, due to time constraints after a slow recruitment process, I decided that it was in the best interest of the study to hire a transcriber. The transcriber signed a confidentiality waiver, which can be found in Appendix I. While completing the interviews I attempted to consistently follow the steps I provide below, keeping in mind that qualitative analysis can be unorganized and develops on its own. I incorporated the skills I have learned to actively listen to the interviews, and I was aware of voice tone and the way in which the story was being told. I indicated silences and laughter that seemed necessary to fully understand the story and removed any minimal encouragers I had made for the purpose of cleaning up the speech. This means that I did not transcribe every small response I may have made while the women were speaking, as these were used to encourage conversation and to evoke responses from participants, and I felt that they were unnecessary and disruptive to the transcription. Fraser (2004) suggested listening to recordings as if they were a radio show in order to maintain lateral thinking. Fraser also suggested researchers consider the following questions when listening to recorded interviews:

- What 'sense' do you get from the interview?

- How are emotions experienced during and after the interview?

- How does each interview tend to start, unfold, and end?

- How curious do you feel when you listen to the narrators?

- How open are you to developing further insights about yourself as a researcher, including insights you are derived from raking over past experiences that are painful?

- Do you have adequate support to engage in work of this nature? (p. 187)

I believe that these questions were best addressed primarily through my reflections, which I recorded after each interview. I later reflected on these recordings and considered these questions further as a part of my analysis.

After transcribing the interviews it was time for me to read and re-read these transcriptions. I wanted to be able to imagine each woman I interviewed and hear her telling the story. Richards and Morse (2002) stated that in order to code the researcher must be familiar and close to the data, and through this process themes begin to emerge. Content analysis was used to code the transcribed interviews. I coded data as clusters of thoughts and sentiments began to unfold (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I maintained the practice of creating theoretical memos while looking for themes in the data; this helped me to organize ideas and thoughts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These theoretical memos included thoughts such as "the women seemed to have experienced growth and their own self care in their experiences," "the squashing my spirit theme is closely related to internal stigma," and "how does the lack of housing relate to danger . . . first year most dangerous?" Comments such as these were useful in reminding me of thoughts I had

related to the analysis and discussion, as well as reminders of literature that I wanted to return to.

Based partially on the categories that were created after the pilot interview, the interviews were coded through line-by-line colour coding. Throughout the analysis, I again took memos to help develop codes further and to later contribute to theming. Theoretical memos helped to organize thoughts pertaining to the themes and to give direction to speculation and reflections (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In some cases I audio recorded my thoughts that came to me so that I was able to keep track of streams of thoughts. Colour coding was the approach I utilized for coding themes and ideas and for creating labels. All approaches to coding ultimately strive to make some sense of "messy" data (Richards & Morse, 2002). An example of the coding that took place can be found in Appendix J. As colours would not be visible upon printing, colours were replaced with different underlines. The codes were then organized into tables for each participant. Definitions of the codes can be found in Table 1.

Once I had coded all of the interviews and had identified the emergent themes, I began to interpret the themes or commonalities that are present throughout the data (Richards & Morse, 2002). I attempted to make links between the themes and offered explanations to create a sense of what the information meant for the question being asked (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). People tell stories differently, and I paid attention to see if the interviews circled around themes, were well rehearsed, or seemed somewhat contradictory. These were all things I needed to take into account during my analysis (Fraser, 2004). As Fraser (2004) recommended, I concentrated on identifying aspects of

stories, which helped me to avoid focusing on one domain of life, such as intrapersonal

aspects, interpersonal aspects, cultural aspects, and structural aspects.

Table 1

Category Definitions

Category	Definition
Emotions/Feelings	Any expression of the impact of the abuse and/or leaving the relationship on the participants' affect.
Reasons for Leaving	Statements of particular incidents or desires that influenced the participants' decision to leave.
Internal Stigma	Discrimination or stereotypes about domestic abuse/family/relationships that the participant identified she felt herself.
External Stigma	Discrimination or stereotypes about domestic abuse/family/relationships that the participant identified existed in her community or at any other time in her experience of abuse or when leaving abuse.
Traits/Escalation of Abuse	Any specific acts or characteristic of abuse experienced by the participant or descriptions of the cycle of abuse that occurred.
Formal Resources	Services provided by agencies or professionals to the participants when seeking to leave the domestic abuse
Informal Resources	Any supports the participants identified outside of the formal agencies and professionals.
Direct Comparison to Urban	Reference to how their rural community experience of leaving abuse differed from what they imagined it would be if they were living in an urban centre.
Personal Characteristics	Statements that participants made that indicated some form of strength they displayed in surviving or leaving and/or changes in personality traits during the relationship.

In this study, I related the intrapersonal aspects to the woman herself. These

aspects were likely most present when discussing what personal strengths the participant

had identified that helped her to leave her abusive relationship. The way in which these women personally perceived any social stigma present was also considered in this context. Additionally, I inquired if participants experienced self-stigmatization. When considering the intrapersonal aspects of the participants' stories, I wondered what it meant if they could find no personal strengths. All participants were able to identify at least one strength within themselves that they utilized during the abusive relationship and after they left. The interpersonal aspects relevant to this study involve the abusive partner, formal and informal supports, and how these people influenced the women's decisions made at that time. The cultural aspects of the women's stories are important since I am interested in any social stigmas about domestic abuse and mental health that exist in the rural communities. Finally, I needed to consider the structural aspects of stories and how they are influenced by social systems. When listening to the women's stories I attempted to hear what social stigmas or patriarchal mindsets have been present in their lives.

The transcriber and I transcribed the interviews with the service providers. I also read through the service providers' interviews, colour coded them, and made notes. As previously discussed the service providers were not originally the participants sought for this study. However, in my decision to include this population, I was able to see that in the analysis process, triangulation could be utilized. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) identify triangulation as a technique that helps to demonstrate validity. In this study the triangulation that took place was data triangulation; considering different sources when asking a research question (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). In the analysis process the data acquired from all sources, in this case the rural women and the

service providers, is compared for similarities and differences (Guion, Diehl, & McDonals, 2011). As categories emerged during the coding it became apparent that they supported the themes found in the interviews with the rural women. I, therefore, organized the results from the service providers' interviews into the rural women's themes.

Interpreting Influences

Feminists identified that it is important for researchers to link "the personal with the political" (see Jackson, 1998; Rienharz, 1992; Segal, 1999; Yeatman, 1994; Young, 1990, 1997) (Fraser, 2004, p. 193). Popular metaphors or attempts at humour gave me clues as to what cultural and societal influences were present for each participant. One of these sayings that was prominent throughout all of the interviews was, "It's your bed, you lay in it." This came across as a strong rural perspective of the role of women in their marriages and as a belief that played into decisions made by rural women in abusive relationships. As I sought to apply the findings from women's personal stories to a larger population to make change, I looked for commonalities among participants. I connected themes and even analyzed the style of storytelling (Fraser, 2004). Each of the women circled around a particular theme or way of storytelling. This contributed in particular to the focus of the narratives that were written to represent the women's stories. Janice's story, for example, was rooted in the abuse that she experienced throughout her entire life and the beliefs that were engrained into her as a "Brown" woman.

Personal Reflection

Reflexivity in qualitative research has become the norm over the years. Reflexivity is important for the purpose of understanding oneself as the researcher and

for developing awareness of how past experiences and beliefs can influence the research and how it is interpreted (Finlay, 2002). As a beginning researcher dealing with emotional stories of abuse, I found it important to be able to express my reactions and thoughts on what I had heard. I had originally thought I would journal after interviews; however, my approach varied after each interview, depending on the context. I found recording myself offered me the ability to maintain a flow of thought and to purge (in a sense); however, sometimes jotting down written notes was more convenient or fitting for that particular interview or situation. This step was important not only for reflecting on the influences my own personal thoughts would have on my interpretations but also for my own well-being.

Conclusion

The literature that I have reviewed and the courses I have completed helped me to navigate this research. The practice of reflexivity and self-care was vital in order for me to appropriately conduct this research and represent the women's stories as accurately as possible. Through this research I aimed to gain knowledge on how to better help this population of women while giving them a chance to be empowered by telling their stories. As a researcher and future counsellor, I aspired to gain research experience and further insight into a population I am interested in working with.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter consists of the stories of the three participants who had left an abusive situation. The stories appear in the order in which the interviews took place. These are the participants' stories; I have taken on their words and voices, and in the first person, assembled the stories based on what the women shared with me. In creating these stories I wanted the reader to step into the participants' experiences with a belief in the power of story to touch and effect change. I wanted to create a storied text that would touch readers in the way I was touched when these women shared their stories with me. I wanted to give primacy to what the participant thought was important. The participants were all given pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity. The rural women are presented as, Sarah, Tanya, and Janice. Tanya also participated as a service provider in a separate interview. The other service providers include Kay, Randi, Rita, and Karen.

In this chapter, I also identify the themes within the stories of each of the three participants. Boyatizis (1998) described themes as pattern of information that allow description and organization as well as in interpretation of the phenomenon under consideration. By carefully reading the transcript and the stories, I identified themes that appeared to be important, occurring throughout the women's stories. Initially, I made notes as the ideas about themes emerged, and then I went back through the transcript and the story and colour coded each to identify these themes. I then carefully read through the interviews with the service providers, I colour coded the transcripts, and made notes. As categories emerged, the support for the women's themes was clear. I organized the service provider themes into the themes of the rural women, as I found that they reinforced and enhanced these key points from the women.

Narratives

The main purpose of this study was to give rural women who have left abuse a voice. I wanted to give them an opportunity to have their stories heard. Here I provide brief narratives that represent each woman: Tanya, Janice, and Sarah. These narratives consist of sections of the interviews that most depicted the overall story of each woman and her experience. Changes were made in order to enhance the flow and understanding of the narrative, but it is ultimately made up of the words of the woman. The titles capture phrases or statements made by the women that I felt were powerful, meaningful, and captivating. Each of the women reviewed the narratives and were asked for any feedback or suggestions on what I had written. Of the three women, only one chose to provide feedback.

Barbie wouldn't listen to Ken: Tanya's story. We did everything the "proper way." We dated, got engaged, then married, and had children. He had an expectation of female and male roles, and as a farm girl, I expected that too. When I became pregnant with his child, things escalated more and the isolation began—he would take the tires off my vehicle, and put it on oil stilts so I couldn't go anywhere.

It took me a long time to get out; I was not emotionally ready. Every time I tried to get out I would stay because I felt worthless and helpless, and I believed it was my bed—I gotta lay in it. Then my mother-in-law gave me a small window of opportunity to leave when my husband was away working, and I took it. Financially of course I had nothing, everything was in his name, and he ruined my credit at the beginning of the relationship. Seven years it took to get out, there were so many attempts but . . . you

sabotage yourself, you get scared, and worried. My husband came from a very prominent family, which scared me away from trusting the police or even friends.

I didn't have any knowledge about domestic abuse. I didn't know about the stages of domestic violence. I had no idea about qualifying for legal aid, and I was ignorant to what was out there for me. I couldn't afford housing myself, so I accepted our first marital home from my husband because the mortgage was paid and it was one less worry. He still had some control in my life.

In the community I came from, it was believed that severe domestic violence only happened in the drunk households. They also came up with excuses for the abuse: she deserves it, she must like it, or she would leave; or he works too much, his crop didn't come in very good this year—always an excuse. Because my husband came from a very prominent family I heard all the time, "There is no way in HELL that could have happened; I can't believe he would do something like that." The perception or understanding of what abuse is was also skewed where I came from, very different than what the true definition is. Physical abuse is only when you get the shit kicked out of you so much there is blood everywhere. I certainly didn't realize what I was going through was domestic abuse until someone taught me the whole breakdown of abuse.

I wouldn't go to the local food bank because the town was so small everyone would know me, but when I tried to use the city's food bank, they wouldn't accept me because my address was outside the city. The only resource I used was the Career Office at the city's university. I had no idea about places like the Women's Centre. In the rural communities there is a general lack of resources, and the services I was referred to being available to me were in the city—only available to those women who could get there.

My mother was very supportive of me. She was the one person I trusted and could always depend on; she was going to be there regardless. Rural women have a lot of faith and hope, but unfortunately we don't utilize it for ourselves, only for everyone else in the neighbourhood.

I believe that you get one flick of empowerment and if you hold onto it that's when you can allow it to flow. As much as I appreciated my mother-in-law's help, that wasn't what ignited my strength. One day my Aunt and I were watching my daughter play Barbie when she had Ken smack Barbie. My aunt asked why she did that and her response was, "Well, Barbie won't listen to Ken."

"Well that's not right," my aunt said.

My daughter responded, "Well that's what Daddy does to Mom." Hearing my own child's response to the abuse gave me a clearer focus and began empowering me to leave.

Yes, it took me 7 years to leave. I guess what was different about this time was what happened the day before my mother-in-law gave me that opportunity. I've never told anyone but my counsellor this before . . . through all the shit I went through, I never ever contemplated suicide. The day before I left, I was contemplating suicide, and it scared the hell out of me. It really hit home for me then, because if I wasn't there to take care of my kids, who would . . . him?

More than a set of tits and a vagina: Janice's story. One day he came home and said, "I think we should part." He had been acting really out of character leading up to that day. Leading up to this I had been a prisoner in my own home. He took whatever he wanted because I did not want to fight, I just wanted out.

I had tried to leave the relationship about 8 months before. I phoned social services and asked them if they could give me help, and they said, "No you have to leave first." I could not bring my kids to the women's shelter—they were 17 and 19. So, I mean, where do you go? You fall between the cracks when you have kids that are mature and you are still responsible for them.

I went to my social worker and asked her, "What do I do? Where do I go?"

She phoned Mental Health and said, "Where do I send her?"

I could have done the same damn thing. I thought her being a social worker, she would know where to send you if you have issues. So I phoned the women's shelter and I said, "I would like to come in and see somebody," and I am told I have to wait three weeks to see anybody. Three weeks! She said to phone the crisis line, so I do, and guess what happened? It went to voicemail. So it turns out the government had cutbacks and so they don't have the crisis workers.

It was the same with the transitional centre. After I got out I went to them and they said, "Oh well it happens for every Métis woman." Are you kidding me? So all of this crap is going on, at the same time I'm trying to establish a roof over my head for my son. I was told, "There's a church that will give you furniture and everything else like that." Okay, that's fine but the thing of it is, you always need milk, you always need the little things. It just isn't there and that's what happens with a lot of women and why they go back, because of the struggling.

At one point I just wanted to say, "Fuck it. I'm done. I might as well stay the way I am because they don't care either." This is your logic. You know, it really is, because when you're hurting that bad it takes so much for a person to reach out and have

that trust. You have no self-worth, and then you can't get in for 3 weeks and you're like, "Wow, that just proves my point."

Before my last husband I married a perpetrator; he molested his sister and he says, "Everyone fucks his sister," and that's the end of that marriage. I dealt with sexual abuse. I was raped from the time I was 5 and it still went on 3 years ago with my husband. I felt for so many years that I was a set of tits and a vagina and everything else didn't matter.

I would like to have a Métis or native support group. Because you know what, I'm sorry but White people do not understand. It might sound prejudiced, and I hope it doesn't; it's just a statement of fact. It's even worse if you're Brown and you grow up in a rural community, because it's supposed to happen to you. It's unreal when you're in this kind of town. As long as you go to the women's shelter there is a stigma; that's friggen sad. Everyone looks at this city and says, "Because it's a city," but you know what, everybody knows everybody in this damn city. It's like you're under a microscope, you don't even know who you are, what you are, you're bruised, you're hurt, you don't even feel like a human being in my case. I've got to make sure this part of my life doesn't touch my business.

I didn't think I was under domestic violence. I was surprised beyond belief. Yeah he strangled me and threatened my kids, but I mean, it wasn't like he beat me up all the time. As a Métis woman you are raised that you're garbage—that anyone can have sex with you, fondle you, beat you, do anything they want to you. You have absolutely no pride when you're a Brown person. But I have a choice now because I am not just a set of tits and a vagina. I'm a human being with feelings. I know he came so close to

squashing my spirit; I am spiritually based, and I couldn't let that happen. Of all he's taken from me, I couldn't let him have my spirit, because if he took that I would be broken.

I wanted to be happy again: Sarah's story. It was quite difficult for me to leave. I left and went back a few times. I thought it would change; he said it would be different, "I'll do this, I'll do that." Empty promises. When I would leave his family would try to scare me back. They caught me on the street one time and were punching me in the face. I couldn't even walk downtown. They would go after my family too because you know my family was trying to help me. His family was really rough, and I guess people in the community are scared of 'em too; they had a reputation. The last time he contacted me was before Christmas at my mom's, and my brother happened to be there. He was yelling through the windows, and my brother went out here, and he said, "Stay away from here and stay away from her," and he called the cops. That's when I made the decision that I had to leave my hometown because he just wouldn't leave me alone.

We had a police station there but sometimes there was no one there. They may be in another town half an hour away; they took their time getting there, took half an hour to get to my mom's. The nearest shelter was in a community where my ex lived, who I had also left because of abuse. His house wasn't far from the shelter, so I didn't want to go there. I tried another town that was 2 hours away and they wouldn't take me because my son was 16. After 6 months my son and I got accepted into housing here, and we have our own place now. There was no second-stage housing.

I used one program here that really helped me out. I have been doing stuff on my own, getting back on my feet. I've used Mental Health for counselling, and Alcohol and Drug Assessment and Counselling (AADAC). I was drinking pretty heavy there before I got my son back—I didn't know how to cope with it. I used another program to help deal with the abuse; I didn't give up on that part. I think if there were more programs like the one I used in my hometown more women would understand that they shouldn't have to be scared, and they should do what feels right. They have nothing like that there.

I can't see them opening up a women's shelter in my hometown, but they should have a little office you know for women, so they can go to talk about anything. A place they can go to talk to someone without the whole town knowing and talking about it. Things do get around in that town pretty quick. My mom was helping me out financially, and I stayed with her for a while. I was trying to find a place to live in a town closer to home, but there was nothing. There were people here helping me out like the Salvation Army and stuff around the community, where they pay your damage and move-in costs to help you, but I couldn't find nowhere to live.

Yes, I have had to stay strong for a long time. I kind of get that from my mom. I had been fighting to get my son and daughter back at the same time. When I was staying with my mom my son got drunk one night and my ex brought him home to my mom's and tried to wiggle his way back then. My family helped me out with whatever. Yeah, I was scared financially, but I had to get used to the fact that money wasn't going to be everything for me.

Beliefs about domestic abuse. . . . I dunno it's right there. Everyone sees it, but nobody ever does anything about it. My family would tell me things about my ex, and I

didn't want to believe it. I left because I wanted a better life. I wanted to be happy again. I was tired of walking on eggshells and not doing things. I wanted to start doing things for myself.

Summary. These narratives provide a brief insight into the experiences of the women. These stories are intended to give the reader some perspective of how the women presented their stories to me, as the researcher, and what was important for them to share. These stories give the reader a chance to have a snapshot of the women who participated. The stories provide a glimpse into these women's lives and the experiences that were formed by different values, meanings, relationships, priorities, and commitments. The narratives were also a way of having the women's voices heard and to let them share their story in a positive manner.

Themes from Across Interviews with Rural Women Who have Left Domestic Abuse

According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), discovering themes is important because (a) the basis of a majority of qualitative social science research is to develop themes, (b) being explicit about how themes are established allows for rigorous assessment of methodological procedures, and (c) qualitative researchers require an explicit vocabulary to communicate across and within disciplines and across epistemological positions regarding their procedures such as data analysis.

The themes in this study are not simply abstract concepts; they are expressions found embedded in the data as a whole, including participant interviews and field notes. These themes come from the interview data (an inductive approach) and from my prior theoretical conceptions of domestic abuse (an a priori approach). My a priori understanding of what constitutes domestic abuse in rural communities and the

challenges that women face and the supports accessed comes from what I have identified in the literature review and from my own set of values and personal experiences, which I recorded in my field notes. Strauss and Corbin (1990) labelled this a priori understanding as "theoretical sensitivity" (p. 41), and suggested that it offers a rich source of themes and conceptions in the analysis process. The themes are shared across all three interviews conducted with the rural women who left abusive relationships.

Themes common in rural and urban women. In this section, I identify themes that emerged from the interviews with the three rural women that are similar to those themes found in the literature on women leaving domestic abuse in general. These themes include (a) It Helped me to Survive, (b) Giving In, (c) It Took More Than Once, and (d) The Support of My Mother.

It helped me to survive. All of the women in this study discussed ways in which they had endured their experiences in abusive relationships. Each woman had a very different experience but each identified at least one prominent action that they took in order to survive the abuse.

When discussing the strengths and positive characteristics that she recognized in herself, Tanya identified that she had to block the strong emotions that she was experiencing:

I numbed myself out to be honest. And that may not sound like a strength, but if it wasn't for me numbing myself out and just kind of going through and working myself through it, I wouldn't have survived it. . . . Yeah I turned all of my emotions off. I even got Prozac so I wouldn't feel anything.

Sarah also discussed struggling to deal with other emotional and family concerns along with the domestic abuse. Her way of surviving was also relying on the numbing effects of substance: "I was drinking pretty heavy. I didn't know how to cope with it."

Fortunately, at the time of the interview Sarah was utilizing AADAC to help her to deal with her drinking. Sarah also indicated that she was currently using a number of resources to work on issues related to the abuse and to get herself back on her feet.

Janice had dealt with sexual abuse her entire life; it began as a child within her family and continued on as her husband was also sexually abusive. She described how she would have to find ways to stop the sexual abuse in order to get through it:

With my husband it was just ripping my legs open, hold me by my hips and lick me like a dog. I had to piss in his mouth because that was, he thought, I came and so I knew how to survive in that situation because I didn't know what else to do because he wouldn't stop unless, you know, there was liquid somewhere, and so I always felt ashamed and dirty because I did it, but it helped me to survive.

Janice acted out of fear and a desire to survive, and although she felt ashamed and dirty she knew this was something she had to do. When Janice began to understand her husband and how he was thinking, she was able to adapt in order to make it through the difficult and abusive incidents.

All of the women survived in various ways; however, there were particular behaviours that stuck out because, from an outside perspective, they appeared to be more negative or unhealthy. This sheds light on how stuck these women felt in their lives, and how desperate they were to keep going.

Giving in. As much as the women in this study fought and survived in their own unique ways in their abusive relationships, there were also times when they felt they could do nothing but give in. It seemed as though they were simply exhausted, no longer wanting to fight, and tired of defending themselves. Living in a very small community, Sarah was not able to escape her partner and his family, even once she left the relationship. As she was constantly visible, she had no choice but to eventually give in and leave.

> Bottom line—worry. I couldn't even walk to the store without running into one of his family. . . . The last time he contacted me, he was yelling through [my mom's] windows. That's when I made the decision to come here; I had to leave [my hometown] because he just wouldn't leave me alone.

Janice had left the relationship, but due to a lack of housing and a desire to stay with family she had attempted to settle in her community. Unfortunately, her ex-husband and his family stalked and harassed her still. Sarah eventually conceded and left her hometown. When Tanya left her abusive relationship she realized that she was unable to support herself financially; there was no women's shelter, and she could not possibly afford housing. Knowing that she had to find a way for her and her kids to stay out of the abusive environment she agreed to take housing from her ex-husband: "[After I got out] he wouldn't give me a monthly money allowance; he just paid that mortgage (Tanya was living in her first marital house with her children). So I just surrendered because the house had a mortgage paid, and I wouldn't have to worry about it."

Tanya felt that she had no choice but to rely on her ex-husband for the house, despite wanting him out of her life and to be away from the abuse. It was Tanya's desire

to provide for her children and to be safe from her husband that made her feel as though she had to give in to him once again.

When Janice finally had an opportunity to leave the abusive relationship, she realized she had to move as quickly as possible: "I gave him whatever he wanted. He took whatever he wanted because I did not want to fight. I just wanted out." Janice left her relationship and her home with virtually nothing. She recognized that she may only have a small window of opportunity to leave the abuse, and she was willing to give up anything to take it.

These women were simply fatigued by the abuse that they had endured over time. Finally, toward the end, they had to give in in some way in order to ensure their survival or freedom. Giving in to these things seemed like the best way to get away.

It took more than once. None of the women in the study escaped their abusive relationship permanently on the first attempt. Like many other women who are in abusive relationships, finding opportunities and the strength to leave an abusive relationship and stay out of it was a challenge. Sarah described her experience of cycling back and forth:

I would try to go and it was quite difficult. His family would scare me back. . . . When I did go back with him, [my family] were disappointed with me, they wanted nothing to do with me if I was with him. . . . I thought it would change. He said yeah, "It would be different, I'll do this, I'll do that." Empty promises.

Sarah experienced a struggle between the desires to have her relationship work, wanting to believe that the abuse would stop, that her partner would change, and having the love and support of her family. This form of conflict seems to be quite common for

women in abusive relationships. Sarah provided a story representative of the repetitive struggle to be free from abuse.

Tanya also attempted to leave more than once. At the beginning of our interview, Tanya noted that she was married for 8 years and spent almost the entire time trying to escape, as the abuse escalated as soon as they were married:

Getting out took a long time and was a huge process because emotionally I was not ready. . . . Every time that I would try to get out you know you feel very worthless and helpless, and it's your bed—you gotta lay in it. . . . Yeah, 7 years, I would get the gall, and then no. I'd be almost out the door and then something else, like some thought or action or some scare tactic or something, and then I would stay.

Tanya's story is also a common one. Her husband kept her so controlled and feeling negative toward herself that it took very little to make her stay again. Time and time again Tanya worked up the courage to leave the relationship but something always pulled her back. Another element that kept Tanya in the abusive relationship was the rural belief that she grew up with, which was that the abuse was her problem—she got into this relationship and she had to make it work. The abuser tends to bring the woman down so that she does not feel that she has the power or the ability to leave the relationship, trapping her in the cycle of abuse (Eastman et al., 2007; Hall Smith et al., 2010; Logan et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2002).

A barrier Janice described in trying to leave the relationship before she did finally escape was the lack of resource support:

I tried to leave the relationship about 8 months before, and I phoned social

services and I asked them if they could give me help, and they said, "No, you

have to leave first." I could not bring [my kids]—Lisa was 17 and Scott was 19—

to the women's shelter, like I couldn't. So I mean where do you go?

Janice attempted to reach out to various resources and did not have the confidence

in them to leave at that time. Janice was in a dangerous and scary situation but the idea

of leaving it with no support or plan was also unnerving.

The women all reported barriers that kept them in a loop of attempting to leave

abuse and being pulled back in. The women spent between months and years wanting

and trying to leave, however, various barriers or controlling aspects of the relationship

prevented them from taking this step. Unfortunately, this can leave the women in a

dangerous situation, putting their physical and mental health at risk for longer and longer

periods of time (Campbell et al., 2002; Logan et al., 2003; Tomasulo & McNamara,

2007).

The support of my mother. All of the women reported support from their mother

in some way during the time of the abuse or when they were leaving. The mother was

the one person each woman was positive she could always rely on. Tanya reported that

her mother was really the only person she trusted:

You used your mom a lot and maybe one close friend . . . my mother was there

for me . . . [but] my mom had too much of herself invested in it. Her advice was

probably not always the best because she was thinking of me as daughter and her

as mother. . . . She was going to be there regardless, so no matter how hard I fell

or how shitty it was, she would still be there.

It seemed as though Janice experienced support in another way from her mother. During the time after Janice left her husband she was caring for her mother who was very ill. This was the only family member who she was connected with: "After my mom died, [my family] died to me. They didn't do anything for support for her or me."

I got the sense that having her mother in her life, and caring for her mother, provided Janice with a sense of connectedness and love that she was not getting from the rest of her family. This relationship was important during her time of need.

Sarah's support and relationship with her mother seemed very similar to that of Tanya's, in that her mother was her biggest supporter, but there came a point when she felt the negative consequences for her mother were becoming too prominent:

> I stayed with my mom for a bit . . . [she] helped me out financially. . . . Yes, actually I have [had to stay strong], and I kind of get that from my mother, but yeah now she's getting old.

Summary. It became clear through the interviews and the process of coding and theming that the rural women certainly faced many of the same issues as urban women. As found in past research (Logan et al., 2003), the themes that emerged that presented as general issues for women in domestic abuse are important in order for people to understand that all of the basic concerns are present along with the themes unique to rural women. The themes that showed a relation between rural women and urban women were those that did not seem to be exacerbated by rural living. These themes are important for painting the picture of the life being lived by women who are in abusive relationships. By first considering these themes, I found it became more apparent as I explored the

unique struggles of rural women that these women had additional barriers that needed to be addressed.

The themes in this section were also present in past research. The women in this study all included support from their mother as being one of the only constant supports in their life during their experiences of trying to leave the abuse. This supports Bosch and Bergen's (2006) finding that women in abusive relationships tend to have less social support than women who are not.

In this next section, the focus will be on themes that emerged that are unique to the experiences of rural women leaving abusive situations. The questions that were explored in the interviews included:

1. What challenges do women in rural communities face when seeking help for domestic abuse?

2. What formal and informal resources do rural women draw on?

3. What social supports help these women leave abusive relationships?

4. What is the impact of social and felt stigma on their decisions to leave their rural communities?

5. What strengths do these rural women recognize within themselves that help them to leave the abusive environment?

The themes that emerged from the service providers' interviews were integrated into the themes below. The themes below emerged from the women's interviews and represent their stories, and the service providers' responses support and enhance these themes. Tanya participated in an interview as a service provider as well as a rural woman who has left domestic abuse. I helped Tanya to separate the two experiences in the

separate interviews by forming the questions in a way that were specific to her experience as a service provider. Tanya has been telling her story of abuse for a number of years, advocating for women in abusive relationships, this has helped her to be able to differentiate the two experiences.

Themes unique to the rural context. Consistent with the literature on rural domestic abuse, participants contended with a number of challenges in seeking help for domestic violence (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Eastman et al., 2007; Hage, 2006; Hall Smith et al., 2010; Logan et al., 2003; Logan et al., 2007; Shannon et al., 2006). As found in the literature, timing, resources, and social supports all impact how long a rural woman stays in an abusive situation (Davis, 2002). In this section the following themes emerged that seem to be unique in some way to rural populations or are exacerbated by aspects of rural culture. The six themes include (a) Under a Microscope, (b) It Didn't End There, (c) Lack of Resources, (d) Squashing My Spirit, (e) From Numb to Empowered, and (f) Reaching Out.

Under a microscope. Visibility in rural and small towns was a theme that was represented across all participants. This was discussed in a number of ways in the interviews. There was a lack of desire to access resources that were available to them, which led to either not using resources at all or having to leave their hometowns and families in order to seek help. Being in a small, close knit community where everybody knows everybody led to feelings of shame and embarrassment for some of the participants. The inability to anonymously access necessary resources led to fear of judgement from other community members. Worry about gossiping on behalf of other community members and feelings of shame were described in the interviews. One

participant, Tanya, experienced this when attempting to use the food bank in her community and met further barriers when trying to access the same resource in a larger community:

Food bank, like you know I wouldn't go there because it was such a small town and everyone knew who I was. So I wanted to go to the city food bank because no one would know me right? The whole self-image thing. And they wouldn't accept me because my address was outside the city. So I couldn't utilize that, so I didn't want to go to the [smaller towns nearby], because they know who I am or I know them, it was humiliating.

Janice was the only one of the three women interviewed who lived in a town that had a women's shelter; while she was not able to access the shelter for housing purposes, she did use it for other resources such as support groups. Sarah had to leave her hometown in order to access housing through the women's shelter. However, she was still cautious of the town she chose, as she had another abusive ex-partner who lived near the shelter in one nearby town. Despite being in a town large enough that it is considered by some standards, to be a city, and to have a shelter, Janice did not feel like there was much privacy or acceptance around the use of this resource:

Everyone looks at [this place] and saying because it's a city . . . but you know what, everybody knows everybody in this damn city. Being in a rural community, it's like, everybody knows everybody. If you go to the women's shelter, they know that there is . . . that you got issues.

While there was a sense of pride for leaving an abusive relationship and seeking help through resources such as the women's shelter, Janice felt that by being transparent

about it she was setting herself up for judgement. Once people knew she was going to the women's shelter, she felt they began to pity her.

In small or rural communities, not only do most of the residents know each other, but any prominent families seem to be even more visible. For Tanya, this conspicuousness of the family who ran a large farming company came across as a struggle for her in a number of ways. For some time this visibility deterred Tanya from seeking help from formal resources. When considering the use of police she even became concerned that due to the prominence of this family, any police investigation may be compromised. There was also lack of belief on the part of others that abuse would happen in her household, Tanya described the following as an example of her experience:

> Because I came from a very prominent family, "There was no way in HELL" quote unquote, I heard that all the time. "There's no way in HELL that could have happened. I can't believe he would do something like that." And even when it came out that he was found guilty of sexually abusing my oldest daughter, even though he was found guilty, and his pre-sentencing is at the end of next month, they're in their minds thinking I must have set that up.

Fortunately, these women were able to overcome the lack of privacy that exists in rural communities. However, they all suggested that this is a prominent issue for many women in these situations. There was agreement amongst all of the participants that there are women in rural areas that stay in the relationships because they are scared of who will see them and what they will think. Not only is there a concern about self-image, but because of this lack of privacy, women who are in abusive relationships also witness the struggles of women who do leave and become discouraged. When discussing

with Sarah her suggestions for what resources should be available to women in the town she left, her recommendation was simple: "Maybe they should have a place where you know they can go talk to someone there without the whole town knowing and talking about it. Things do get around in that town pretty quick."

Although Sarah did not believe that her hometown was big enough for a shelter for women fleeing abuse, she was concerned about the lack of resources that women could use in order to talk safely and become informed. All the rural women felt as though being in a small town and knowing everyone had its downfalls. They recognized that it made it more difficult for them to leave, but also that feelings of shame were exacerbated by the sense of visibility in their communities. There seemed to be a stronger sense of judgement for their decisions to leave and for the life they had been living.

This was also a common concern brought forth by the service providers. They identified that living in a small community often means that people and their lives are very visible to everyone else. All of the service providers identified that the women who are leaving abuse struggle with accessing resources because they will likely have to interact with friends and neighbours; thus they must to expose their situation, as Tanya identified when she attempted to use the food bank. Karen, a service provider, has experienced this as an issue when women call the crisis line and then the crisis workers want to send police for transportation and safety services. Karen found many women are concerned about secrecy and, therefore, do not want this type of transportation sent.

For Kay and Randi, who are also service providers, a major issue the women they work with is utilizing the shelter but not wanting their vehicle visible because the shelter

is on a busy road. This can possibly jeopardize their confidentiality and safety. Further, in Kay's experience women have concerns about confidentiality when using the shelter in a small town because if they suddenly disappear, many people know immediately where they have gone; it is very difficult for them to hide. Tanya often works with women who are concerned about being seen going to the offices that provide the services they need in order to flee the abuse:

> You don't want to be seen going into those offices—what I do is tell the ladies to make it look like they are bringing in a donation, so if they're in a small town and they need some help.

Even when the resources become available for the rural women, Tanya indicated that there is still shame and embarrassment to even ask their doctor for referrals or to be seen going to the mental health office on the one day that the services are being offered. The idea of having their abuse exposed is embarrassing to the women.

Issues of confidentiality are not limited to the women seeking the services themselves. For the most part, the service providers noted that the women have concerns about accessing services because they likely know the employees at the shelters. The women are worried that their stories may not be kept confidential—much like Sarah's concern about being able to discuss issues without the whole town knowing. A problem Randi often experiences is that she and many of the other workers at the shelter grew up in the town she currently works in, so assuring the women that their confidentiality will be maintained can sometimes be a difficult task. Unfortunately, Randi cannot always get the women to a point where she can explain to them that their confidentiality will be maintained; they simply will not use the shelter because of these concerns. In other

cases, Kay experiences clients who will talk to her in public on her private time, leaving her to have to explain the interaction to her family and attempting to salvage confidentiality. Kay described this as a difficulty for her working in a small community where it is likely that she will often run into her clients and need to find a respectful way to acknowledge them without giving away why she knows them.

Overall, confidentiality is an issue for both the women and the service providers in these small communities. Slama (2004) referred to life in a small town as the "goldfish bowl effect" (p. 10), as people are always curious about others in the community and often discuss community members. Confidentiality is a key factor for women leaving domestic abuse, not only for safety purposes but also due to the beliefs that they have grown up with that lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment if they had their secret divulged. This supports findings from Logan et al.'s (2004) study, which found that rural women in abusive relationships identify the lack of confidentiality and anonymity as barriers when attempting to leave the abuse. Not only did the women in this study face the barrier of lacking confidentiality, but the service providers also identified confidentiality as an issue for the women, as well as for themselves, when trying to offer support and resources. Working in rural communities, the service providers had to deal with the issues of dual roles and interactions with clients outside of work. When service providers encounter clients outside of the shelter, they not only need to consider the interaction between the two of them, but if they are with family or friends they also have to ensure the confidentiality of their clients.

It didn't end there. All three women discussed some form of control by their partners after they had left the abusive situation. Although continued control could

certainly be a barrier for urban women as well, there are certain aspects of this theme that were discussed by the rural women that made the controlling behaviours unique to their situation. The women indicated that the previously discussed theme of lack of privacy exacerbated continued control, as it was harder for the women to get away and completely disappear. With some of the women, finding affordable housing was a struggle and, therefore, they had no choice but to stay in the town for a period of time, relying on friends or arranging other living arrangements. Tanya realized that she could not afford the housing in the city and there was no women's shelter in her area. In order to put a roof over her and her children's heads she accepted a house from her ex-partner:

> I couldn't afford the housing and rent and utilities and stuff because he wouldn't give me a monthly allowance. He just paid the mortgage bill [of our first marital home], so I just surrendered. I surrendered because the house had a mortgage paid and I wouldn't have to worry about it. So he became abusive that way . . .

Even after leaving the marriage and wanting to be away from her abusive partner, Tanya had no choice but to accept financial support from her ex-partner since she had very little in terms of finances. Like other women in this situation, housing was not affordable, and living at a shelter was not an option, but she had to find a home for herself and her children. Tanya's ex-partner refused to help her in any other way, had controlled all of the finances in their marriage, and had damaged her credit ratings. Tanya had finally taken control and was trying to move on, but her ex-partner refused to give up his abusive control. Housing was an issue in regards to continued control for Sarah as well. However, her situation was slightly different—the control was not from her most recent abusive partner. For Sarah, there was a women's shelter in a nearby

community but because of a previously abusive partner she had also left this was not an option for her:

> The nearest [shelter] was in [another community], and I didn't really want to go there because I had an ex that was from that reserve, and I left him because of abuse too. His house wasn't far from the women's shelter.

In Sarah's case, her ex-partner wasn't necessarily aware of the control he still had on her life; however, this represents the extent of abuse, the continuous and unfaltering control. After leaving an abusive relationship, finally taking a very difficult step, these women continue to struggle against their abusive partners. Unlike the other women, Janice was able to obtain a home but much to her surprise, this home was not the sanctuary from her past she had been hoping for:

> My husband was still coming to my house then and I didn't know it, but he was stealing things out of my house. He would get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and leave and he was taking stuff and I didn't know, and I didn't want to fight him because I know what he's like.

Even after leaving the abusive relationship, Janice's ex-partner was able to instil fear and control her, as the community was small enough for him to find her. The women left the abusive relationships in order to be free, safe, and happy, but these aspects of their lives didn't end once they walked out the door.

Again, living in a rural community allows for the control to continue in the way that it is harder for the women to disappear from their abuser. Once the women leave, there are limited choices as to where to stay if they want to stay close to their home. Sarah was unable to move into a women's shelter after leaving her partner; therefore, she

moved to her mother's house. Unfortunately, this situation was not made easy for her by her ex-partner and Sarah was not able to continue living with her mother and using her as a support:

> Stayed with mom for a bit and he caught me there. He didn't make it very comfortable for me every time I wanted to see my mom. . . . He would stalk, he would phone my mom's, he would come to my mom's and peek through the windows. . . . That's when I made my decision to come here. I had to leave [my hometown] because he just wouldn't leave me alone.

Sarah had been able to leave the abusive situation but had a desire to stay in her hometown, with her mother, with whom she shared a close relationship. Her ex-partner continued to exert control over her by forcing her to make a decision to leave her family and home by stalking and aggravating her.

The women also revealed more long-term effects of the abuse that indicate a certain amount of control that the abuse has had on their lives. These were not necessarily indicators of the ex-partner having direct control but the lasting effects of the abuse holding control over certain aspects of the women's lives. Janice had realized the effect that the abuse had on relationships in her life:

> [My grandson] hugged me the other day, and I was panicking because my husband was very big, he was like 6'2, 250 pounds and he had big hands, my husband would hold me and not let me go, and holy Christ I panicked. There are only 3 men I feel safe with now. Isn't that sick? . . . I want to feel safe.

Tanya also described continued control long after leaving the relationship but it was in relation to her daughter. Shortly after leaving her husband, Tanya discovered he

had been sexually abusing her oldest daughter. At the time of our interview it had been approximately 6 years since this discovery, and Tanya and her daughter continue to fight this battle: "He was found guilty of sexually abusing my oldest daughter . . . his pre-sentencing isn't until the end of next month."

Service providers also recognized that living in small communities can result in the women not being able to completely disappear. Sarah had described being stalked by her husband after she fled abuse and was living with her mother. Karen described this exact problem as something that many rural women may face: "It's much easier to be found in a smaller community and subsequently stalked and harassed or you know have your place broken into and further assaults etc."

Tanya also identified the continued sense of control or abuse, which presented as issues of self-esteem. As a service provider Tanya works with many women who have left domestic abuse and continue to believe that they are not worthy of a healthy, relationship with a man. Many women Tanya comes in contact with through her work continue to struggle, perhaps ending up in abusive relationships again, mainly due to their damaged self-worth.

To summarize, the abuse affects women in a variety of ways for a period of time after they leave the abuse. Some of this continued control is visible, purposeful acts of the men, while others are simply the aftermath of their experience. Research identified this continuation of control in a number of aspects. Wuest and Merrit-Gray (1999) found that women end up becoming labelled as victims while they are trying to access resources after leaving domestic abuse, a label that is certainly not easy for them to simply let go of. The continued sense of fear and concern of being found that is experienced by rural

women is supported by the Statistics Canada (2011a) finding that 26% of women who are killed by their partners have already left the relationships. The women in this study made brave choices to leave their abusive relationships and took steps to better their lives. Unfortunately, largely due to the nature of their small-town living, the controlling aspect of the abuse continued. They were unable to fully have their lives back without certain aspects being dominated by their ex-partners and the abuse that took place.

Lack of resources. Both the rural women and the service providers identified a lack of resources in each community. The resources tended to be intertwined in how they presented as barriers to the women and included financial, transportation, housing, and education concerns.

Financial concerns. All three women identified finances as an issue or barrier when leaving abuse. The types of support or lack of support amongst them varied. Overall, it seemed as though being worried about having the money to support themselves, their children, and a life without their partners was a common theme. This was mainly due to constraints on the resources available to them in their own communities. Tanya was not able to access a women's shelter in her community, yet was also not able to afford moving to the city and paying for living accommodations. Tanya's ex-husband had controlled all of the finances and his control carried through to after she left:

> Housing – I couldn't afford. . . . Financially I had nothing . . . everything was in
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> his name or under the family run operations so it looked like I had no assets, no
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> money, no credit. My credit rating was ruined . . . in the beginning he used my
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> credit to his advantage and wasn't paying on it so my credit rating went down . . .

so what was in my name were really bad loans or anything else that keeps you at bay.

Tanya's financial concerns came directly as a result of financial abuse from her husband. From the beginning of their relationship he took full control of money, even ruining her credit rating, perhaps foreseeing this as a way to continue control further into the future.

Financial support from various outside sources was also discussed in the women's interviews. There were mixed feelings about the helpfulness of these supports. The Government of Alberta offers a stipend of $1,000 to women fleeing abuse. Janice did not feel as though government services were sufficient in helping her in her time of need:

I tried to leave the relationship about 8 months before. I phoned social services and asked if they would give me help and they said, "No, you have to leave first." . . . The government, they give you a thousand dollars for fleeing abuse they say . . . the fleeing abuse, is to me, bullshit, you get a thousand dollars, that takes care of your rent.

Janice's frustration with the funding and the services was that she needed to feel as though she already had plans and support in place before she could actually leave the relationship. Unfortunately, current policies do not allow for that sense of security. Janice was also on stress leave from work and was still waiting for her sick benefits to begin; her finances were not stable. On top of her lack of income, Janice's husband had filed for bankruptcy and was telling people in the small community that she was a gambling addict; there was little chance of her obtaining the money from him to flee.

While the women all felt as though finances were a definite barrier and concern for leaving the abusive relationship, Sarah had come to her wits end: "[Women] are scared to go—scared to be on their own. . . . Yes, I was scared financially, but I had to get used to the fact that money wasn't going to be everything for me."

Sarah had made the decision that despite concerns she felt about having the money to support herself and her son, she had to make the difficult decision to leave. She was also lucky that she was able to have financial support from her family and was also provided monetary support from local organizations such as the Salvation Army.

Many rural and urban women who are in abusive relationships face financial abuse. For these women, concerns about finances are unique mainly due to lack of shelters or housing. Two of the three women were not able to access shelters and had to travel to nearby communities in order to access resources. Cost of travel, and oftentimes the cost of services in larger communities was a strain on the rural women.

Transportation. All of the service providers interviewed suggested that a major issue for rural women when seeking help was the lack of transportation. Tanya mentioned that when she was in an abusive relationship, her husband would put her vehicle on oil stilts and remove the tires so that she could not leave. Tanya also noted that it is great to have the referrals to resources; however, if a woman is living 45 minutes out of town, it can be a major barrier to accessing the services. Although this was her experience as an abused woman rather than as a service provider, it has informed her of what other women she works with may be facing.

Randi stated that their community no longer had a Greyhound bus stop; therefore, women who were trying to leave to go to other communities or those women trying to

access the resources in that town had a lot of difficulty finding transportation. "We don't have a Greyhound stop in [this town]; a cab is about $80 from [here] to [the next larger town]. So that's a big fare for a lot of people; I mean, it would be for me."

Randi and Kay also both identified that in their town, cabs are scarce, again making transportation to various resources including their shelter quite difficult for the women. Kay admitted that they likely would never have a bus service in their community. She believes it is something that would be useful, however, not something that would be recognized as a necessity for a town with a smaller population. Kay summarized the difficulties of lack of transportation for them women leaving abuse in this response:

Lack of small-town transportation, right; you take a cab, or you have your own vehicle, or you walk. And if you don't do those things, if you can't afford a cab, and its 40 below, and you can't walk—you have no transportation options.

Kay and Randi also noted that their shelter is unable to finance transportation once women leave the shelter after their 30-day stay. Although they will find a way to get the women there, the shelter is unable to provide them with transportation to wherever they have then decided to go.

While transportation was not necessarily a barrier for the women living in their community, Rita and Karen identified transportation as an issue for women from outside communities. Karen noted that often women who call the crisis line are unable to access transportation to get to the nearest Greyhound station. The women indicated that despite some towns having resources available, the transportation service is lacking; therefore, women are often unable to leave or become discouraged in trying.

Housing. There were several issues related to housing for rural women leaving domestic abuse. The lack of shelters in rural areas and affordability arose as main concerns. For Sarah, housing became a concern as there was no shelter available in her town and she had limited options. She waited 6 months for housing, living with her mother in another community. Janice and Sarah both faced the barrier of having a mature child, and they were both unable to take to their children to a women's shelter, again giving these women less options for where to go. Janice noted that despite having some churches and other community resources offer some help with furnishing and other household items, it could still be a struggle to afford housing costs.

One of the other main issues was the lack of second-stage housing. Randi and Kay both informed me that they were not able to offer second-stage housing for when the women left the shelter, as there was simply no funding. Kay mentioned that it is something they have considered and explored, but the financing is not available.

> The inability to be able to find affordable and safe housing. Because there is no second-stage housing here, so there is [town] housing but there isn't, you know. . . . We can do a lot of safety planning and have security systems installed and things like that but there is no place that has safe housing like this. Like the magnet lock door and security cameras and those kinds of things. I mean, depending on their risk level when they leave here, it varies, but there isn't much in the community for people who need higher security.

The second-stage housing was a major issue for Kay and Randi in their community, and the fact that they do not have the funding to provide it was another

barrier. The women are only able to stay at the shelter in this town for 30 days and then, unfortunately, they are on their own, with few options for affordable housing.

As an outreach worker, Tanya often hears women say they cannot leave because they cannot afford it; they cannot find housing. She also spoke about the difficulties of being able to afford utilities, especially if the woman has never had any bills in her name; therefore, she has to pay a deposit to secure the services. As mentioned previously, Tanya also faced this obstacle when she fled abuse, eventually having to live in her first marital house, relying on her husband because she was unable to afford housing on her own. Rita mentioned that for many rural women the question is very simply, "Where do I go where I am safe in a small community?" Many of the women that she works with face these types of issues related to housing, and it prevents them from leaving the abusive relationship.

Education. Lack of education and knowledge about domestic abuse was a concern for both the women and the service providers. Janice and Tanya both expressed not knowing that they were truly in an abusive relationship or knowing about the cycle of abuse. Another issue that Janice faced was she had originally felt as though she could openly discuss her abuse and her use of the women's shelter but later began to feel as though people treated her differently, as less of a strong woman. It could be that a lack of education in the general community leads to these types of reactions to women who have left domestic abuse.

Some of the service providers felt that there is not enough education about domestic abuse in rural and small towns. Rita and Karen discussed the lack of knowledge about even being able to get help and where. Rita mentioned that there is a

lack of knowledge of what is really out there, what really happens. In her experience these women are questioning whether they should talk about the abuse unless they really have to, not wanting to expose their situation to others unless absolutely necessary.

As a service provider, Tanya felt that lack of education in the school system is also a problem. She felt that there should be more information about family violence in the schools, and there should also be a wellness worker for students to speak to: "I think the school should implement more awareness of domestic violence and let the kids know that there are other families like [that], and that it's wrong and it's a criminal offense."

Tanya has also experienced a lack of knowledge or education about domestic abuse in professionals through her work. As an outreach worker, Tanya described being openly welcomed by some communities, but in others seemingly she was mocked by some police officers. She noted that it sometimes happens that police or other first responders have a lack of knowledge and may see the situation as, "Oh shit, we're going out to Nancy's house again. Oh she must like it, here we go again." This has been Tanya's experience in some "deep rural areas," where she believes that first responders need to increase their understanding of the cycle of abuse. Randi and Kay do attempt to educate their community in a variety of ways about domestic abuse and the services that they offer. However, the service providers found basic education in school and other areas of training are not as strong.

The service providers all seemed to agree that there is a lack of education or knowledge about domestic abuse in rural communities. This lack of knowledge or understanding in the community can limit the women who are attempting to leave abusive relationships in a variety of way.

In conclusion, both women and service providers have identified a variety of resources that are lacking. As a result of this inadequate support, the women are faced with further hardships or in some cases will not leave the abusive situation. Janice identified that there are women from her community who see the struggles faced by women like her, and feel it is easier just to stay in an abusive situation. Observations such as this make it clear that the lack of resources not only affect the women who do leave but also affects those who may be contemplating fleeing.

Squashing my spirit. Through the relationship and the journey of leaving the abuse, the women all described a certain sense of losing themselves, as well as developing strong negative feelings toward themselves. This came from various sources including the abuse, their community, and their own beliefs. As previously presented in Chapter 2, enacted stigma is the discrimination or devaluation based on perceived inferiority or unacceptability that is socially imposed on women who are or have been in abusive relationships (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Felt stigma includes a sense of fear of enacted stigma but also involves the sense of shame felt by women who have been or are being abused (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Throughout this theme enacted and felt stigma are present, and both were clearly debilitating for the women. These enacted stigmas led to felt stigma that the women carried with them throughout their journey.

The women seemed to have gone through various stages of losing themselves throughout their abusive relationships, and even more when they left the abuse. There were certain characteristics the women identified that they lost or that changed while they were in the abusive relationship. Sarah described this change in self as the main reason she finally left after returning to the relationship several times before: "I was tired of

walking on eggshells and not doing things; I wanted to be happy again. Doing things for myself."

Tanya also had a personal experience of realizing how little she was like her former self, and that was a strong push for her to get out of the relationship:

I was never, through all the shit I went through, I never contemplated suicide . . . ever. The day prior to my mother-in-law being there, I was contemplating suicide and it scared the hell out of me, that's what was different.

There seemed to be a strong sense for these women that in the time they had been with these men and the relationship had become abusive, something in them had changed, and they were no longer the women they wanted to be.

When talking with the women I got the sense that there is a part of rural culture that has a strong expectation of the role of women as wives and mothers. This was important when considering this loss of self that was present in the interviews, because as these women lost the pieces of themselves through the abuse, they had less and less to hold on to. Janice felt like there is a strong sense of role as mother and wife in small communities and that this is a problem for many women. Janice noted experiencing loss of self both during the relationship as well as after leaving it:

I know that he came so close to squashing my spirit, which is, I am spiritually based, I couldn't let him have my spirit because if he took that I would be broken. . . . [After I left] the worst part for me was trying to figure out what I was and who I was, because you lose all sense of being . . . when you leave, what is your role? Who is Janice? What is Janice? Where is she? It's like you're lost.

Janice seemed to go through an entire cycle of understanding of who she was, what she was losing, to complete loss, but there was a sense of desire to find herself again. What was interesting about Janice's growth after leaving the domestic abuse and working on the trauma and herself, was the loss of who she thought she was her entire life. However, I would describe this as more of a positive loss. Janice described her entire life as abusive, and she had always been treated as a sexual object. This continued into her marriage, where she described having to "piss in [my husband's] mouth because he thought that I came and so I didn't know what else to do. . . . It helped me to survive." As Janice utilized individual counselling, group counselling, and worked on the trauma of domestic abuse, she began to realize that she was "more than a set of tits and a vagina." She discovered that despite what she had been taught all of her life, being a Brown woman did not mean that "you're garbage, that anyone can have sex with you, fondle you, beat you, do anything they want to you. You have absolutely no pride when you are a Brown person."

As Janice continued her journey of growth after leaving her abusive partner she was able to shed the ashamed, sexualized self that she had developed through years of abuse in her rural Métis community, a community that existed within her already small town. Janice grew up with these social stigmas about being a "Brown" woman and these beliefs became a felt stigma or a sense of shame for who she is. This felt stigma left her believing that she was worthless and deserving of the abuse she endured.

Tanya also felt as though there is a learned belief about the roles of men and women in a relationship and in the working world. Being a "farm girl" Tanya also believed in these strict gender roles, beliefs that lead to loss of self and strength in an

abusive relationship. Tanya indicated in her story that when she truly believed those learned gender roles she lost her individual self in order to become that wife and mother. Again, Tanya was experiencing this felt stigma about her role as mother and wife, and feared the enacted stigma that she would endure if she left her marriage.

The women all experienced some loss of self, whether negative or positive, during or after the abusive relationship. Some of this loss was typical of women experiencing abuse; however, there seems to be a stronger sense of role in family and community for these rural women. They grew up and lived in small communities that taught them that certain roles or identities were expected of them, and in some cases, the abuse is a part of that.

Throughout this loss, the women also seemed to have developed strong negative feelings toward themselves. The cycle of abuse tends to foster feelings of worthlessness, and helplessness among many other strong emotions (Hage, 2006; Krishnan et al., 2001). The abuse itself definitely initiates many of these strong, negative feelings the women have about themselves; however, for this particular population, their experiences afterwards seem prolong them. Tanya described these feelings as keeping her from leaving the relationship over and over again:

> Every time I would try to get out, you know you feel very worthless and helpless, and kind of it's your bed—you gotta lay in it. . . . We also believe, unfortunately, that there is something wrong with us if we're not in a relationship.

This sense of having to stay in the abusive relationship because it is her duty as a wife was a common undertone in the interviews. Janice described continuously trying to be a better wife because of her husband's previous marriages in which he was treated

poorly. When the women are trying again and again to leave the sense of failure and shame can certainly be present. In Sarah's experience, there were feelings of shame she felt from disappointing her family after returning to the relationship several times: "When I did go back with him they were disappointed with me; they wanted nothing to do with me if I was with him."

The lack of understanding of the cycle of abuse, including how perpetrators manipulate the women they are abusing, plays a role in families simply not understanding why their loved ones returned. This in turn, like in Sarah's case, can lead to feelings of shame and hopelessness.

This sense of shame and hopelessness after leaving an abusive relationship seems to be exacerbated by the general lack of understanding or beliefs around domestic abuse. Janice experienced feeling as though people pitied her rather than acknowledging the strength and determination that she possessed in leaving the situation:

They can't understand, and then it's like they peer at you a different way. . . . Now I'm not a strong-minded woman, I'm a weak minded woman, because I told her about my domestic violence issues. So you know, and it's like I tell people, I say: domestic violence isn't me; it's something I went through. I don't need your pity. I don't need you feeling sorry for me. They did enough of that shit. You know what I need you to do? Treat me like I'm a human being. Not like I'm a victim.

Janice began to feel more shame about her past because of the reactions of people when she revealed her abusive experiences. Janice also spoke about how she stopped telling people that she was going to the women's shelter for group support because of

how she felt she was being perceived. She had once been outspoken and transparent about her counselling and her abusive relationship but the lack of understanding she felt from others limited her ability to comfortably share.

The lack of resources or the visibility of them also evoked negative feelings. Tanya discussed not wanting to use the food bank in her small community because everyone knew who she was and there was a certain self-image attached to that. Tanya identified that there may be some small resources available to the rural women but they are not used. "But for anybody who is living the domestics, like the true domestic relationship aspect, will not use them because they're worried about gossiping or the shame attached to it."

Rather than feeling supported, the women felt shame and hopelessness, which contributed to them not using the already limited resources available to them. Tanya went on to discuss how the negative stereotypes about abuse in her small community affected her confidence in being able to leave:

> Well, it impacted my self-esteem. You know, that's why I was too ashamed to do things, out of fear, shame and guilt. . . . You just feel worthless. . . . You believe it, right? You start making excuses and then you start crazy thinking, there's something actually wrong with me.

Tanya's experiences shed light onto how rural women may be internalizing the negative stereotypes that they have grown up with or lived with for many years. She was impacted to a degree that her negative feelings affected her ability to leave the abusive relationship.

The lack of resources available or an inability to access them can exacerbate rural women's feelings of worthlessness and despair. Janice became very overwhelmed when reaching out to various resources, finding them unavailable to her or unsupportive:

> With the transitional centre . . . she said, "Oh well, it happens for every Métis woman.". . . You come here and you don't feel like you deserve it. . . . It was horrible, just horrible. I can remember every day thinking, you know what, I think I'd let him strangle me or threaten to kill my kids again. . . . Like some days, I would wake up and I would cry and I would just feel horrible. Just horrible, that I didn't deserve to live.

Janice struggled significantly with feelings of lacking support and with a sense of shame that she needed to be seeking such services. She also referred to feeling like she was begging when she had to look for financial support, and at a time when she was already feeling so "volatile" she felt she was further degrading herself.

After years of living with the strong misconceptions about domestic abuse and women's roles in their communities, the women all described the stigma that kept them in the abusive relationship as well as made them experience shame throughout the process of leaving. The external stigma and the strong sense of shame and fear resulted in a number of other strongly negative feelings toward themselves. These feelings of shame and helplessness, among others, were intense and made their decision to leave the relationship even more difficult. The negative emotions continued even after fleeing the abuse and were intensified by rural stereotypes and struggles with accessing resources.

The service providers also identified numerous misconceptions and stigmas about domestic abuse, as well as about themselves as service providers. These also contribute

to the women's self-esteem and felt stigma. They offered their perspectives on misconceptions regarding domestic abuse, which they heard from a number of sources; the women in the shelter, women staying in abusive relationships, the community, and professionals. According to Rita, the stereotypes are the same old stereotypes, and she would not limit them to rural areas. "Our population as a whole, our society, supports family violence." Karen, who has worked in smaller communities in the past feels that abuse is kept a secret in rural areas, such as farming communities, where the population is still very male focused.

Across all of the service providers the idea of "you made your bed—you lay in it" was expressed in some form. Both Karen and Tanya used this exact phrase to describe how many people in rural communities feel about domestic abuse while Randi and Kay discussed particular examples of this belief:

I had a client come last week, her in-laws have refused to have anything to do with her kids since she called on December 23rd—she had her husband arrested. She had ruined Christmas for everybody, so they aren't going to help the kids. . . . She called the police, but she's the one who ruined Christmas, because she's put up with it for so long so she should just be used to it. She's put up with it for so long that you know she felt that she wasn't justified to call police.

The example from Randi was referring to the German Mennonite community that is prominent in her area. She stated that there is no word for divorce in their tradition; if a woman left her husband, her family would likely turn their back on her because culturally it is her burden to make the marriage work no matter what. This idea was also something that Tanya described thinking to herself when she was trying to leave her

abusive marriage. Ruth also identified that in rural communities there is a lot of support for women to stay in relationships. Although Sarah's family were more in support of her leaving the relationship, they seemed to have a strong stigma about her returning to the relationship, not necessarily understanding the difficulty of permanently leaving abuse.

Most of the service providers also brought up the presence of and the causes of abuse. Randi and Kay both found that their community does not believe that abuse exists in their area. This belief also leads to assumptions that if abuse does not happen in the community, then only people from other towns are utilizing the resources. Along with outside community members using the shelter services, Randi has found that people in her town then believe that the shelter brings the "bad people" into the area: "The shelter brings all of the quote unquote bad people to the area. So people that are unstable or have mental health issues, or addictions, or criminal behaviour. Like, we're the reason they're here."

While interviewing Sarah it came across that she strongly believed that the main reason for the abuse she endured was the family that her husband came from. Even when discussing what resources would help her town she was adamant that this particular family needed to be "checked out."

Kay considered that sometimes people turn a blind eye to the fact that there may be abuse within their town, "Is that you do not want to see it because if you do, shouldn't you do something about it?" Tanya also identified that people realize the abuse is there, but they simply do not talk; people do not want to get involved. Another result of people not believing that there is domestic abuse in their communities is the creation of shame and guilt for the victims:

A lot of people don't like to admit that they need help. They don't want that to be

out there, but also on the abuse side too, people don't want everyone to know that

they are leaving an abusive relationship or situation either. The stigma of getting

help but also what that means, like why are you getting help?

Tanya also identified that women leaving domestic abuse experience a lot of shame and

guilt, likely brought on, in great part, by the stereotypes about domestic abuse.

There are also some misconceptions about the women who are under domestic

abuse. The rural service providers described stigma about how the women may have

brought on the abuse or their contribution to the situation. Kay and Tanya both discussed

hearing the idea that the woman who are in abusive relationships are crazy, generally

because people only see the couple in public and are unaware of how she is treated at

home, and would have a hard time believing it.

Another common stereotype that was discussed in interviews was what abuse is

and what it stems from. Most of the service providers stated that people in their

communities often do not truly know the definition of abuse. As Randi stated,

The different kinds of abuse. People more easily identify the physical abuse but

they don't necessarily realize that financial abuse or spiritual abuse or you know

psychological abuse or verbal abuse are forms of abuse as well. It's more black

and white.

The understanding of abuse is often not present in these areas. Trying to help

women to understand that they are in an abusive situation is sometimes a struggle for

rural service providers. In her work as outreach support, Tanya experiences a multitude

of misconceptions about the root of the abuse, often coinciding with excusing the abuse:

"They're always making excuses—but the thing is their husbands, common law partners, and even fathers have all taught them this because again those are the rigid roles."

Tanya identified a number of different stigmas pertaining to where abuse exists and what types of homes it is present in. A prominent stereotype is that abusers live in poverty, that they are uneducated, that ultimately they come from a long line of dysfunctional families. This affects the women in that they begin to believe that they are dysfunctional and that there is no escaping that. Kay described people believing that the abuse is not that bad or that the women are exaggerating it and are using it as an excuse to leave the relationship. Tanya also often encounters various beliefs about the abuse being related to anything except for the abuser himself:

It's all alcohol and drug related, that it can't be the individual himself, that it's stress related. That if she didn't like it she would leave aspect is huge. She's lost her mind as it is, and she's just lucky [he] stays with her.

Tanya experienced these stereotypes as a service provider but also was aware of them simply from growing up in a rural area. These beliefs seem to be well engrained in the communities. Further to this Tanya also experienced stigma as a female outreach worker in some communities:

I almost get a sense of mockery from some providers or some RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] members . . . so I am either really embraced, I'm either misunderstood, or I'm just a bra burning feminist that's trying to brainwash—I get that all the time, "You're trying to brainwash my family," or "You're trying to tell her lies." I get that a lot, brainwashing is a good one, and "Oh, those women."

Experiences of service providers such as this allow insight into what they are facing in trying to help rural women, indirect barriers for the women trying to leave abuse since the service providers may not be able to gain acceptance.

Finally, Tanya described the stigma or misconceptions that the rural women consider about what will happen if and when they leave the abusive relationship. There is a fear of loss for the women in a number of ways. Tanya explained that in rural communities, even if you are separated by distance, there is a very strong sense of community and family for these women. Therefore, the idea of losing your mother and sister-in-law and possibly your whole community creates fear for these women. Further to this, the rigid family roles play into the fear. Tanya explained that for many rural women, being a woman means being married and having a family; therefore, leaving the relationship has an impact on their self-esteem. In Tanya's work she also meets women who have fears and misconceptions about the shelters and the world outside of their small communities: "They're thinking of a mats program; it's just a bunch of mattresses on the floor, 60 people in a gymnasium sort of thing, trying to make it."

The women with whom Tanya often works with also have some stigma about city living and the kind of lifestyle it would bring for their children. Many of the women are worried about exposing their children to the city. They have grown up with the negative ideas of "them city folk" their entire lives. Tanya describes this as the "internal noise" that the women have to deal with in midst of everything else that is happening for them.

The service providers offered a different perspective of the stereotypes that exist in their communities. The combination of stigma about abuse, the people involved, as well as misconceptions about the services being offered creates barriers for women

seeking help. The interviews with both the rural women and the service providers made it apparent that stereotypes and misconceptions about domestic abuse are pervasive in rural and small communities. This affects the women and their choices, as well as the help that service providers are able to offer. There are many influences that cause the women to fear stigma from their communities and to develop strong negative feelings toward themselves, leaving them with feelings of disempowerment and shame.

From numb to empowered. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged. The first theme, "I didn't know it was abuse," came from the rural women and the second, "Lack of knowledge about domestic abuse," emerged from the service providers' interviews. All of the women described a journey to leaving the abusive relationship rather than making a decision early in the abuse and leaving immediately. There were various reasons for why they stayed for as long as they did, and there also seemed to be breaking points for the women. A lack of realization or knowledge that they were even experiencing domestic abuse may have been a barrier that kept them in the relationship. The service providers also identified that a lack of knowledge about domestic abuse for women trying to leave as well as the general population acts as an obstacle to seeking help.

I didn't know it was abuse. Each of the women told their story, and each included the struggle they endured in trying to leave and what kept pulling them back in. This theme describes the ways in which each of the women was stuck in the cycle of abuse.

It took Tanya, 7 years to leave her abusive marriage. For her, she had become so degraded and negative toward herself that she was easily prompted to stay in the relationship. Tanya grew up as a "farm girl" and was raised with strong beliefs about

gender roles and responsibility. She had believed that "you made your bed—you lay in it." Tanya suggested that these rural beliefs also have a skewed perception of what abuse actually is—that only severe physical abuse matters, which again led to Tanya's lack of understanding of the stages of abuse. All of these rural beliefs also led to shame and guilt, as Tanya did not want to leave and access resources that would allow people in her community to know what she was going through. Tanya was intimidated by her husband and his family, who were very well known in the area; this also made her feel as though she could not leave. Tanya described feeling for a long time that this relationship was simply her life and that she had to deal with it, but then suddenly there was "one flick of empowerment" that she let flow and she was able to leave. Although Tanya identified her appreciation for her mother-in-law helping her to leave, there was an incident with her daughter that pushed her to realize she had to leave the abuse:

> I was watching my daughter playing Barbies, and she had Ken smacking Barbie to shut up more or less, and my aunt was in the other room watching her and she said, "What are you doing?" . . . [My daughter] said, "Barbie won't listen to Ken." [My aunt said,] "Well that's not right." She's like, "Well that's what Daddy does to Mom." So things like that really started empowering me to leave."

For Tanya it took the realization of how the abuse was affecting her children to get her moving in the direction of leaving. However, this is not to say that once she left it was easy. The rural beliefs and lack of knowledge still followed her as she left the relationship and tried to make ends meet in her new life.

Sarah described leaving and returning to her abusive relationship several times. Although her family was unsupportive of her being in the relationship and were often

telling her things about her partner that she "didn't want to believe." Sarah believed that her partner would change. The times when Sarah did leave, she was scared back by her partner's family. His family was violent toward Sarah as well as her family, who were trying to help her. Sarah's partner would also threaten to kill himself, and she began to feel afraid to even walk around town. Along with the fear, Sarah's community lacked resources. She was unable to access a shelter in her town; there was no place for her to even gather information or talk to a professional about what was happening to her. Although there was a police station in Sarah's community, the police also served surrounding areas and were often out of town or would take time to arrive when she needed them. These various factors kept Sarah in a cycle of leaving and returning to the relationship.

Janice was very aware of abuse, as she experienced it throughout her entire life. However, what held her back was the belief she was raised with, that she was supposed to be abused, that she was not worth more: "For Métis women it's worse, because you're raised that you're garbage, that anyone can have sex with you, fondle you, beat you, do anything they want to you."

Partially as a result of being raised with these beliefs, Janice did not think she was under domestic abuse. She described being shocked beyond belief that what she was experiencing was domestic abuse, when she scored 18 out of 20 on the risk assessment at the shelter she had no idea how to react. Despite everything that her husband did to her during their marriage, Janice did not believe that she was experiencing domestic abuse because she was not being beat up constantly. This distorted understanding of domestic abuse was similar to what Tanya described, and a part of the reason that Janice was in the

relationship as long as she was. Janice also believed for a long time that you are "always accountable for your actions"; therefore, she was in some way responsible for the abuse. Janice described the idea of not being accountable for her actions in the relationship, of not being responsible for the abuse in some way to be the hardest to understand.

All of the women had certain beliefs or a distorted understanding of domestic abuse that kept them in their relationships. When they were finally able to leave despite various obstacles, they were able to begin to understand the cycle of abuse and that they were not in control, they then became empowered. Each of the women at the time of the interviews was able to describe her journey to becoming stronger and continuing to grow and overcome her past abuse. The service providers also recognized a vast lack of knowledge for the women leaving abuse as well as by the general population in their small towns. The lack of knowledge described by the service providers is presented below.

Lack of knowledge about domestic abuse. All of the service providers identified that there is a certain lack of general knowledge or understanding of domestic abuse in their communities. Rita commented that she believes it is hard to get the education out there about what resources are available, many of the rural women who arrive at the shelter will say, "I didn't realize I was being abused. I really didn't." Overall, Tanya works with people who are not aware of the types and extent of abuse: "They think unless you get your ass kicked thoroughly all the time, then that's abuse. Emotional, mental, verbal, financial, spiritual, sexual even, they have no idea."

This description is representative of what Tanya experienced in her relationship, as well as the belief that Janice had about abuse. Randi and Kay both spoke of clients

who were unaware that what they were experiencing abuse as well. Randi and Kay described working with women who did not realize that having a partner control the finances, who does not allow you to have friends, or ignores you for days were types of abuse. As an outreach worker Kay works to build rapport with her clients so that she is able to challenge clients on their beliefs to help them realize that they are living in abusive relationships. Randi believes that in many cases the basic understanding of domestic abuse is just not present:

> I would say that definitely people's personal beliefs and their understandings of domestic abuse also. The cycle of violence and escalation factor, a lot of people really don't understand that it just about never gets better, really rarely does it ever get better, it just gets worse and escalates. That basic understanding of the cycle of violence and the escalation of it can definitely impact their understanding of that.

The service providers believe that this lack of knowledge or understanding about domestic abuse can impact the use services for these women. This lack of understanding was certainly a stigma that kept Tanya in her relationship longer. Randi recognizes that as service providers they do not necessarily have more knowledge than everyone in the general public, but that they do have more knowledge pertaining to abuse than the average person does. This knowledge allows service providers to help women understand the cycle and dangers of abuse as opposed to when they use informal resources that may be less likely to recognize the danger and, therefore, are less likely to tell them they should not go back. Tanya believes that this education needs to start in the

school system. Tanya indicated that in rural communities the issues of domestic abuse are not taught in any of the health classes.

The service providers all provided examples of areas in which they see a lack of education or understanding of domestic abuse amongst their clients and the general population of their communities. They also all recognize the impact that this has on their services and the chances of women leaving and staying out of abusive relationships.

Reaching out. This theme includes the services that the women indicated they accessed, the resources identified by service providers as available in their communities, the barriers to accessing these resources as identified by the service providers, and finally access to services. It is important to realize that services are available for women fleeing abuse in some of the communities, or in nearby communities, however, the trouble is in how accessible they are or are perceived to be.

Resources used by participants. The rural women in this study identified the resources that they utilized when leaving their abusive relationship. The women each had varying successes with these resources as well as dissatisfaction or struggles with other resources. Tanya used very few resources, as she was not able to gain access to some resources such as the food bank in the nearby city and felt shame in using the food bank in her local community. The only formal resource that Tanya utilized after leaving her marriage was the city's university career office, which was able to offer her some guidance.

Sarah did not have access to a shelter in her hometown but travelled to a homeless shelter that would accept both her and her 16-year-old son. This situation only lasted for about a month before she moved home and applied for housing in a community

approximately 2 hours away. It took approximately 6 months before she received housing for her and her son. When Sarah did receive housing she was able access financial support from community resources such as the Salvation Army. Sarah also used a number of resources that she described as helping her to deal with the abuse that included: AADAC, personal counselling, and a domestic violence program.

Janice was the only participant who had a women's shelter in her community; however, because she had mature children she was unable to use the shelter for housing. Janice reached out to social services and eventually received the subsidy for fleeing abuse but felt as though the financial support offered was not substantial enough. She was unable to access anything until she left the abuse. She attempted to use the Métis Transitional Centre but found them to be unsupportive. Janice also accessed various types of counselling, including group and individual counselling, counselling focused on childhood sexual abuse, as well as grief counselling. Janice was able to find numerous resources to support her once she left her abusive marriage; however, one of her main concerns about resources was the lack of groups or services directed at the Métis or Native population.

Available resources. The service providers were also able to provide information about the resources that are available to rural women leaving domestic abuse. These resources have been presented in Table 2 with the names of the services providers representing the communities they work in, as well as the approximate population of that town.

Table 2

Available Resources

Service Providers	Population	Resources
Rita and Karen	61,000	Policing Emergency Shelter Second Stage Housing Women's Outreach Support Groups Public Information Centre for First Nation and Métis Women Immigration Office Victim's Assistance Group Educational Presentations
Randi and Kay	8,000	Women's Shelter Outreach Services Crisis Line Limited Transportation (shelter two days a week) Human Services Alcohol and Drug Assessment and Counselling (AADAC) Local Police Services Health Unit Dating Violence Presentations Mental Health Income Support [District] Housing Alberta Works Alcoholics Anonymous Mennonite Central Committee Translators Parents Programs Health Nurse Pilot stationary projects in rural towns
Tanya	91,000	Women's Shelter Outreach Child Welfare RCMP Domestic Violence Unit Domestic Violence Courts Project Sexual Crisis Centre Trained Emergency Room Nurse

Limitations of available resources. Despite being able to inform me of the resources that their communities offer to women leaving domestic abuse, the service providers also recognized that there are many limitations or barriers to accessing these services. This is a struggle for many service providers as they want to be able to help the women but they are also faced by barriers such as funding or understaffing. It is here that the broader definition of rural is important. When considering the limitations of resources we must consider that some of the larger communities that are represented by the "rural and small town" definition and the services they provide. What is important here is that these larger towns are also providing services and resources to the smaller and more rural communities, and limitations and barriers exist in this context, which are discussed in this section.

As previously discussed, the service providers identified confidentiality as an issue in small towns. This barrier applies to virtually all of the services that are offered in rural communities. Kay and Randi have the issues of their shelter being known by the general public. Since they are in a small town, most of the general public have an idea of where the shelter is, so they occasionally have friends and family members arrive at the shelter looking for the women. The visibility of the shelter in the community can make Kay's job as outreach worker difficult: "My job as outreach I have some clients that won't come here to meet me. I have to meet them in the community or their home because they don't want their vehicle here."

Tanya identified confidentiality as an issue within the shelter when there are women who are coming from rural reservations with disputes happening between groups. She explained that despite the confidentiality waivers that are signed, they sometimes

have issues with women contacting people outside and saying, "Hey your old lady is in the shelter right now, trying to get out blah blah blah." Overall, familiarity with the people providing services was identified as an issue when attempting to access various services.

Another barrier to available resources that was identified by all of the service providers was the inconsistency of various services. For many of the communities that Tanya works with, services are only offered by way of pilot stations. Like Tanya, service providers travel to the communities once a week or less. Rita commented on the same issue for many of the communities that they provide aid to:

Even services, such as government services – you might have to wait 2 weeks until an assistance person comes in. Housing may not be there, and you have to wait another 2 weeks. We say to [women] run down to income assistance and you'll be served in a day or two, there you might say go to income assistance and get a rent report. Oh, I have to wait 2 weeks until the social worker comes in.

Consequently, while the service providers who took part in the study were able to say that these resources do exist, they have found that in smaller communities the resources are not necessarily accessible on a consistent basis.

Finances are also a barrier for rural women. Rita and Karen noted that the housing in their area is quite expensive; however, if the women stay in their own smaller towns they are at a higher risk of being stalked and harassed by their partners. According to Kay and Tanya, the financial support from government and agencies are a task in themselves. Kay has had experiences in which the regulations are so rigid for getting financial support and she has often had to advocate on behalf of the women who were

denied. Tanya spoke about the funding offered by the Government of Alberta for women who are fleeing abuse:

> So you have a thousand dollars to escape and you need to find rent and hook up your utilities . . . if you've never had utilities in your name, you need to put that deposit down for any of the gas or electric or what not and find a damage deposit and fill up your fridge and everything else and they expect you to do it on $1,100 to $1,400 a month—can't do it. Sorry, you're going to stay home.

Service providers clearly stated that lack of finances and financial support is an obstacle for many of the women when attempting to access many of the available resources.

An interesting issue that was brought up by Randi was the use of a translator. While the shelter has access to a number of translators, they were once put in a situation where they needed a translator for a language that was not common to them. Unfortunately, the translator they were able to find was an acquaintance of the client's partner and the woman in need was not comfortable with sharing her story with this person. This is an excellent example of how within the rural towns there are also smaller communities that result in additional difficulties in accessing resources.

Randi explained the difficulty with accessing health services if you are not a resident of the community. Doctor's offices are busy in small communities, so attempting to book an appointment when you are not already a patient of the doctor was identified as a barrier. Randi also identified this same issue for women trying to access services through Alberta Works; if the women are not planning on settling in that town, they are unable to utilize the services offered by this office.

Overall, there are many resources that the service providers offer themselves or can list that are available in their communities; however, they also realize the barriers that exist when trying to utilize them. Some of the obstacles were simply common to living in small towns, while others were more distinct to the populations outside of the main communities.

Access to services. Generally, there seemed to be a consensus that certain resources are more difficult for rural women to access. Coming from a larger community, Rita and Kay realized that they sometimes take resources for granted and it can be easy to forget that services such as financial or housing support from the government are not consistently available in small communities. Randi also mentioned that certain offices are harder for the women to access, especially if they are coming from another community: "It would be great if Alberta Works offices were able to open files and transfer them more readily. If [women] are not staying in [this town], the office won't see them . . . so they can't access the services there."

With women from other communities accessing the shelter in this town, there is a need for them to be able to utilize other services as well; in the example that Randi provided, this is not the case. As an outreach worker, Tanya is not always available. Many of the resources women seek when leaving domestic abuse are offered through pilot stations in their communities; the service providers are not there on a consistent basis. Some of the services Tanya suggested that need to be more readily available include mental health workers and addiction support. Kay identified lack of police services as a barrier for the communities: "See lots of rural people, they don't even have RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] or police. They may be, a hundred miles away,

so I think that's another barrier, another problem is that they don't have police services

sometimes."

Overall, the service providers are able to identify numerous resources available to

women in their communities; however, they also recognize that there are difficulties.

There are particular barriers for women coming from outside, more rural communities.

The women chose to utilize some of these resources and not others and also identified

what obstacles they faced in order to seek help from these areas.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from the interviews with the women and the service

providers are generally supported by past literature and are present in research completed

on domestic abuse in rural areas as described below. The lack of resources is one the

main barriers discussed in literature; the literature found rural women have more

difficulties in regards to transportation and finances, which often impede them from

accessing useful services (Eastman et al., 2007). The lack of resources also exists for

informal resources; Logan et al. (2003) found that rural women are less likely to turn to

friends for support. This finding was also present in this study, as the women reported

concerns about stigma and having few supports to turn to. The literature also found

patriarchal ideologies and gender role expectations as a barrier to accessing support

(Websdale, as cited in Lanier & Maume, 2009). Eastman et al. (2007) reported that rural

women have also been found to have a difficult time fully escaping the abuse, often

having to relocate from their homes, which was also a common report in this study.

As I interviewed the women and the service providers it was clear that their

responses supported each other, while each provided a slightly different perspective. The

women's stories indicated barriers of visibility, stigma, lack of resources or accessibility to resources, and personal stereotypes. The service providers through their own experiences and through the stories of the women they assist supported much of what was stated by the women.

In Chapter 5, the themes and categories in relation to the research questions will be discussed. The practical implications of this study for practice and policy, as well as implications for knowledge will also be presented. The strengths and limitations of the study will also be explored in Chapter 5. Further, the journey of the researcher will be presented, and finally the implications and suggestions for future research will be explored.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter consists of six main sections. In the first section the meaning of the findings in relation to the research questions is discussed. In the second section the implications of the study to practice, knowledge, and research are described. Study strengths are provided in the third section, and study limitations are presented in the fourth section, followed by my personal experience as the researcher throughout my research journey. The thesis concludes with recommendations for future research.

Interpreting the Findings

The purpose of this study was to better understand the unique barriers that rural women face when leaving domestic abuse. The interviews with the rural women and the rural service providers brought forth themes that provided answers to the research questions. I expected that through exploration of the experiences of these women I could gain a better understanding of the overall challenges faced by rural women leaving domestic abuse along with a number of more specific aspects: (a) their perceptions of formal resources, (b) the perception of informal resources and social supports, (c) the effects of social and felt stigma, (d) the personal strengths of the women, and (e) the challenges faced by rural women when seeking help from domestic abuse.

Perceptions of formal resources. For both rural and urban women, the literature has identified the availability but lack of use of formal resources for domestic abuse (Henning & Klesges, 2002; Lutenbacher et al., 2003). However, rural women face numerous other barriers and challenges that prevent the use of both formal and informal resources (Alston, 1997; Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman et al., 2007; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Hage, 2006; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2004; McCallum &

Lauzon, 2005; Shannon et al., 2006). Overall, previous research examining rural

domestic abuse identified a lack of resources, as well as barriers to those services that

were available in rural communities. In the current study, similar findings were also

found.

When discussing the perception of formal resources it is important to keep in

mind that this study utilized the broader du Plessis et al's (2002) "rural and small town

definition" of rural which is important when considering what resources are available and

useful for these women. Although some of the larger communities in this study did have

quite a few resources, these are the more centralized communities and it is the outside,

more, rural communities that are facing more obstacles in utilizing formal resources.

Women from the outside rural communities face issues such as transportation and

finances that can prevent them from recognizing and utilizing services in the larger, core

communities.

Participants identified resources and services that they felt should be available in

their communities but were not. More specifically, for two of the three rural women, a

shelter was not available in their community and housing was either too expensive or

virtually nonexistent. In Alberta, even when shelters are an option for women, they are

often full and must turn women and children away (Alberta Council of Women's

Shelters, 2011b). Although shelters were present in other towns and in one woman's

community, other circumstances such as lack of transportation and concerns of privacy

prevented women from utilizing this service. Another barrier that was faced by two of

the participants in this study was their responsibility for their mature children, who could

not live at the shelter. In two of the three communities represented by the service

providers, housing continued to be an issue. Second-stage housing is not available for the women who have left abuse. The lack of suitable housing was identified as a major issue, as women can only utilize the shelter for so long and after that affordable, safe housing is difficult to find. This concern stated by the service providers is certainly valid, as it has been found that the most dangerous time for a woman being abused occurs when she leaves the relationship (Statistics Canada, 2006). Statistics Canada (2011a) found that 26% of all women killed by their partners had left the relationship, while Hotton (as cited in Statistics Canada, 2006) found that half of the women murdered by partners were killed within the first 2 months of leaving. The service providers identified the lack of second-stage housing, or even safe affordable housing, as a major barrier for the women. Rural women are more visible and, therefore, they are more easily stalked and harassed in their small communities.

Bosch and Bergen's (2006) study found that one of the main issues for rural women was the geographical isolation that they faced. Similar to what Eastman et al. (2007) and Scott et al. (2002) found, the women in this study only had the option of utilizing services in other communities and faced problems with accessing transportation to make use of these services. The service providers as well as the women in this study noted that there were resources available in nearby communities; however, if the woman fleeing abuse lived outside of the town, it became much harder for her to access services. Service providers in this study sometimes suggest to their clients that they can access the police for emergency transportation services but find that the women are too concerned about confidentiality for this to be a viable option.

There were major transportation barriers experienced by participants. Similar to Coyer et al. (2006) who reported that rural women would be faced with their husbands hiding keys or limiting gas so that they could not drive anywhere, one participant was faced by her husband putting her vehicle on oil stilts in order to keep her on their property. Furthermore, both the rural women and service providers found that there was a lack of public transportation that could be accessed or that was affordable. Without access to public transport, their own vehicles, and in many cases a lack of trust in other to ask for help, women can become trapped by lack of transportation.

As found in past literature (Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2002), the women in this study all had concerns about how they would survive financially after leaving the relationship. The participants were concerned about how they would pay for day-to-day living expenses such as groceries and housing. Past literature also suggested that finances become a barrier for accessing resources, including protective orders and lawyer fees that would help the women being abused to stay safe (Logan et al., 2004). Past research has found that 56% of women who were in abusive relationship had partners who prevented them from working (Swanberg & Logan, 2005), which directly impacted their financial stability. Further to this, living in rural areas increases the likelihood of unemployment (Slama, 2004).

Shannon et al. (2006) suggested that rural women in abusive relationships have a negative perception of the criminal justice system. Participants in the current study also noted the challenges in accessing police and legal services. The perception of lack of police support could also be an outcome of the lack of education of participants or by government agencies or education systems on domestic abuse in rural communities.

Similar to the women in the study, Grama (2000) found that women in abusive relationships feared that police might contact family members or friends of the abuser. Previous research has also found that many rural women were reluctant to contact police services and felt there was stigma attached to being abused that resulted in a lack of respectful treatment from police (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). As found in the present study, there is also a strong fear of child welfare becoming involved with the family situation, which could also contribute to the choices made about whether to stay or leave an abusive relationship.

The women in this study each had unique experiences with accessing resources for leaving domestic abuse. Hall Smith et al. (2010) suggested that missing from the literature are women's perceptions of available resources. Overall, the negative perceptions were directed toward the barriers to the resources. The women reported issues such as understaffing, inability to access resources privately in their own communities, lack of specific Aboriginal support, and wait times for resources. Women also expressed some concerns expressed about the lack of available formal supports before actually leaving the abusive relationship.

In both the past literature and in this study confidentiality was major concern for accessing formal resources. The women and the service providers both discussed women having concerns that people would see them using the services, and in many cases this was enough of a concern that women sometimes decided not to utilize these important resources. Logan et al. (2004) found that rural women in abusive relationships struggled with utilizing medical services because they were likely to know the service provider on a more personal level. All of the women in this study had varying concerns about the

confidentiality of their issues in their communities, mainly related to the use of resources.
For the service providers, there were concerns about having dual relationships,
particularly seeing clients outside of work.

Despite the barriers identified, there were also positive perceptions of the
resources the women were offered and that they utilized. Women in this study identified
that counselling that became available to the women as well as the support groups were
very useful. The participants also noted that education about domestic violence opened
their eyes and helped them to realize and understand the situation they had been in. The
women also deemed various resources such as grief and addictions counselling to be
useful. Rural communities tend to have fewer resources available to women leaving
abusive relationships as well as more community and procedural barriers that interfere
with the use of the resources (Shannon et al., 2006). This was certainly the general
finding in the present study as well. Both the rural women and the service providers
identified a lack of services available in many rural communities and noted concerns
about the accessibility of the few resources present. This study supports previous
research through providing the perspectives of both the rural women who have left abuse
and the service providers who are themselves offering the supportive resources.

Perception of informal resources and social supports. Although informal
resources and social supports were presented as two separate questions, they are
discussed here in one section due to the commonalities between them. There seemed to
be a mixture of the amount of social support the women experienced in this study. All of
the women in this study suggested that their mothers were a support in some way.
However, in this study it was clear that other than that relationship the women had only a

small support network of informal and social supports, including family and a few close friends. This study also uncovered that some judgement and unsupportive behaviours were present in social networks for the rural women.

There is a multitude of past research that has studied the use and efficiency of informal resources and social supports for women leaving domestic abuse (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Hage, 2006; Hall Smith et al., 2010; Logan et al., 2003; Logan et al., 2007; Shannon et al., 2006). Bosch and Bergen (2006) defined both emotional support and unsupportive people in the context of abuse. Emotional support is defined as reaffirming that the abuse is unacceptable and supporting all decisions made. This type of support is found to be the most effective and, therefore, its presence is vital in interpersonal relationships. Unsupportive networks, however, are described as those that ignore the abuse, encourage the woman to make the marriage work, or in any way fail to protect the woman from abuse when it was possible. As mentioned previously, unsupportive networks were apparent in this current study in a number of ways. This includes people simply ignoring that the abuse was happening or the stigma around the women having been in an abusive relationship or utilizing various services after leaving.

Bosch and Bergen (2006) found that women in abusive relationships tend to have less social support than others; this can be a result of the abuser cutting off relationships or making it physically difficult to maintain relationships (Hage, 2006). This isolation is often exacerbated for rural women due to the geographical isolation that they experience (Eastman et al., 2007). When rural women are isolated in this way, their social dependency on their husbands can increase (Gagné, 1992). These types of barriers are possible reasons for why intrapersonal coping is found to be more prominent in rural

women (Hall Smith et al., 2010). The women in this study reported that they were often fighting on their own to survive and improve their lives. Some participants included that much of their coping was simply being strong within themselves and coming to make the right choices for themselves.

In a study comparing the experience of rural and urban women in abusive relationships, Logan et al. (2003) found that only one of the eight rural women reported speaking to a friend about abuse, while eight of the 15 urban women turned to a friend for support. Due to fewer social supports in addition to the barriers to formal resources, rural women have limited options for dealing with and fleeing abuse. Rural women already face being geographically isolated; however, the prominence of lacking informal resources that is apparent in this study exacerbates the lack of support.

Perceived impact of social and felt stigma on decision to leave. Link and Phelan (2001) defined stigma as "the co-occurrence of its components – labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" (p. 363). Much of the past research in this area suggested that a major barrier to accessing resources for rural women leaving domestic abuse is the stigma attached to being abused (Eastman et al., 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2004). This study found that stigma and misconceptions about abuse kept women in abusive relationships longer, prevented the use of resources, and generated felt stigma in the women.

Due to the significant lack of formal resources in rural communities, people often turn to their family and friends for support in times of need; however, abused women often do not feel that they are able to turn to family because of patriarchal beliefs or misconceptions about abuse (Eastman et al., 2007). In this study stigma, stereotypes, and

misunderstandings of domestic abuse were identified as the main barriers for rural women leaving abusive relationships. Krishnan et al. (2001) also found women will often not report abuse in order to avoid judgement.

Stigma and stereotypes about abuse were not only an issue for accessing resources but also for leaving the abuse. The beliefs about family, gender roles, as well as the types of households that experience abuse kept some of the women in this study in their relationships longer. Service providers also reported that women in their shelter hold these misconceptions, as do general community members. This was reported to sometimes impact the service providers as well, as some community members believed that the shelter or service brought "bad" people into the community. A study by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (as cited in Grama, 2000) found that even the suggestion that domestic abuse happens in the homes of rural communities is met with disbelief, ridicule, and even resistance. Service providers in this study, 13 years after Grama's (2000) research, reported that many rural community members still do not believe or do not realize that domestic abuse exists in their towns. Since the communities have such a stigma around the existence of domestic abuse, women in the abusive situations feel ashamed to admit that they are victims of domestic abuse.

As noted in this study, one participant believed that the abuse was strongly linked to her partner's family background, which was considered rather "rough." Like many people, this participant believed that abuse only happens in "bad" families. Enander (2010) reported this same misconception of abuse and found that some women expressed disbelief that they ended up in an abusive relationship despite coming from a "normal" (p. 16) family. This idea that abuse only happens to so-called "bad" families prevents

rural women from reporting abuse and leaving, as they live in fear of judgment and need to protect their families.

Women and service providers also discussed misconceptions of what abuse actually is. There was a general consensus by the service providers that most people understand physical abuse but do not recognize financial, emotional, psychological, or spiritual abuse. This lack of knowledge or education about domestic abuse was apparent throughout the interviews as a significant issue. If people in rural communities do not understand the facts about abuse, women who are experiencing it become more oppressed and are less likely to leave the relationship. Past literature did identify that there needs to be more education about domestic abuse in rural communities in order to reduce stigma and victim blaming (Eastman et al., 2007; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007). Ghez (as cited in Davis, 2002) suggested that because there is a belief in rural areas that abuse is a family concern rather than a public one, domestic abuse would continue to be an issue. Eastman and Grant Bunch (2007) also suggested that due to the general public's lack of understanding of the cycle of abuse, community members continue to blame the woman for not leaving.

Enander (2010) found that women would often blame themselves for staying in the abusive relationship for as long as they did. Further, when abused women try to explain to others why they do not leave or the difficulty of the situation, they begin to feel judged and stupid (Enander, 2010). Women in abusive relationships will often internalize the abuse and begin to see themselves through the abuser's eyes (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Lundgren, as cited in Enander, 2010). For all of the women in this

study, the emotional and psychological abuse from their relationships resulted in the women turning these negative beliefs against themselves.

In addition to the negative beliefs instilled in the women by their partners, the stigma from the community and other relationships further generated negative self-perceptions. In past research, women have described experiencing felt stigma when utilizing the mental health resources because their communities associate this service with substance abuse and severe mental disorders (Logan et al., 2004). In rural communities, there can be a strong belief in trying to make the relationship work or that the abuse must be a problem caused by the woman (Eastman et al., 2007). These are the types of beliefs that were described in this current study that kept the women blaming themselves and internalizing stigma. Issues of stigma were salient throughout the interviews. The misconceptions and stereotypes make a clear contribution to the women's perceptions of themselves, their ability to leave the abuse, and the ability of the service providers to aid women fleeing abuse. This stigma appears to be more prominent and have unique aspects in urban areas and should certainly be recognized by service providers, educators, and researchers alike.

Personal strengths identified by rural women within themselves. When conducting this study I felt that it was important to ask the women to identify strengths in themselves from their experience of leaving domestic abuse, in order to take a step back from the negative experiences. From a feminist perspective, instilling empowerment in participants is an important component of research (Hesse-Biber, 2006). Each of the women was able to identify at least one strength in herself, and the women's responses to other questions also highlighted their inner capacities.

Hall Smith et al. (2010) identified four forms of coping, one of which was intrapersonal emotion-focused coping. The inner strengths that the women identified were strongly related to these intrapersonal strategies. Hall Smith et al. identified spirituality as a means of coping, which was described by one participant as a reason to get out of the relationship. Hage (2006) reported that 90% of women identified spirituality and faith as an important protective factor during their abusive relationships. Hall Smith et al. also identified substance abuse as a form of relief. Two participants in this study described substance use as a form of coping during the abusive relationships. Escaping the painful emotions through the use of substance was the coping option that these women felt they had to resort to. One woman in the Hall Smith et al. (2010) study also said that she "thought she was coping" (p. 23) when she was using drugs. Women in abusive relationships also learn the patterns of their abusers and develop an intuition about them in order to protect themselves and feel a certain sense of control over the abuse (Davis, 2002; Hage, 2006).

The final strategy Hall Smith et al. (2010) identified, which was also was present in the current study, were thoughts of death. Although, this may not seem like a coping strategy, thoughts of death represent the inner turmoil that these women experienced, which was so strong that they began to consider this a viable option, as in the case of Tanya. Intrapersonal emotion-focused coping strategies were apparent in the current study and represent that without appropriate social supports to turn to rural women find ways to cope within themselves.

A common theme to the women's inner strengths was recognition in themselves of discomfort and unhappiness. Past literature has found that women in abusive

relationships attempt to preserve agency and self despite feeling trapped in the abuse (Hage, 2006). This intuition about themselves and the desire to maintain self-agency was present for all of the women. It was apparent in Janice's recognition that her spirituality was slowly being extinguished and that this was too vital to her existence for her to let the abuse continue. Sarah simply realized that she was tired of not being happy, that she missed living life for herself; this gave her the final push for her to leave the relationship and cope with the change and resulting stresses. Finally, Tanya noticed her loss of self in her suicidal thoughts and she recognized the impact the abuse was having on her children, these two realizations helped her to finally take a step toward her future. This in some ways indicates that the women in this study had been coping with the abusive situation in a manner that was having some negative effects on them. However, each woman experienced a turning point at which they realized that changes had to be made, and they took action to improve their coping skills and their lives.

Challenges faced by rural women when seeking help for domestic abuse.
Although confidentiality was discussed in regards to seeking resources in small communities, visibility in rural towns is a concern in other ways as well. Women fleeing abuse in small communities cannot simply leave their homes and disappear. Visibility often leads to rural women having to move to new communities, leaving behind their lives. For rural women in this type of situation, having to leave their towns and restart their lives creates a lot of turmoil; despite often being geographically far apart from each other in rural areas, there is a strong sense of community. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2010) noted that rural women are much more committed to their communities; if and when they leave, they are not only leaving their partners, but also

their way of life. Rural women who leave their communities in order to flee abuse have to start a new life, often in a city. For some participants, there are many fears and negative beliefs about city living. Rural women who are in abusive relationships are less likely to have employment experience or they have worked for the partner's family (Krishnan et al., 2001; Slama, 2004; Swanberg & Logan, 2005), and as a result the concerns about finances are further exacerbated when moving to a new place.

Another barrier that was present in the interviews with both the women and the service providers was that the services that would be useful were likely to never be brought to their communities. Knowing the services that would greatly benefit the women facing domestic abuse but also realizing that it is not likely they will ever receive this help seems to be a harsh reality and rural service providers and women face.

Finally, the definition and understanding of rural is a barrier in and of itself. Two service providers who worked in a community that was on the larger end of the rural and small town spectrum seemed confused about why I was interviewing them. These participants seemed to be skeptical of the many differences in barriers between rural and urban populations. While these service providers were able to identify differences and barriers, there were also times when they suggested there were no differences. An example of this was when I asked about stereotypes around domestic abuse in rural communities, and one participant suggested that there are the same stereotypes across rural and urban communities. While this is certainly true to a certain extent, the study findings clearly indicated that there are stronger and unique misconceptions in rural areas. I found these conversations within the interviews important, as they represent that even service providers in the larger communities may not recognize the special needs of

rural women who utilize their services. Slama (2004) suggested that rural areas have their own culture and that there are issues of diversity that must be attended to. The findings from this study supported Slama's idea; the perspectives of the rural women and the majority of the service providers found clear differences between rural and urban populations.

In Chapter 1, I referred to this quote by Eve Ensler (2008): "I think of the security of cages. How violence, cruelty, oppression, becomes a kind of home, a familiar pattern, a cage, in which we know how to operate and define ourselves" (p. 137). This quote comes to me again as I discuss the results of this study. A woman experiencing domestic abuse seems to become trapped in a pattern and cycle of oppression that begins to define her as a person. The experience of abuse in a rural area appears to add another element to how the women become trapped through the violence and the way in which they are defined by those around them. However, upon completing the research I was able to see how the women had become strong enough to break free of this proverbial cage, move forward to create a new identity for themselves, and provide hope for other rural women who may also be caught in this cycle.

Practical Implications

This study's purpose was in part to offer various professionals some insight and suggestions to working with rural women who have left or are leaving domestic abuse. This section discusses the implications for both practice and policy in the appropriate areas.

Practice. This research can contribute to service providers' and counsellors' practice in a number of ways. Primarily, simply realizing that there are differences

between rural and urban women leaving domestic abuse will help professionals to consider the perspective of each woman that they see. If shelter workers and counsellors are approaching rural women with the same framework as they do with urban women, there are likely important aspects of the woman's reality that are unaddressed.

Understanding the social stigmas and beliefs that rural women have grown up with and are experiencing is also vital for service providers. While most women who have been in abusive relationships have had their self-esteem impacted by the experience, the stigmas that rural women experience may impact them in a unique way. Not only has their self-esteem been impacted by the abuse itself, creating feelings of shame and worthlessness (Adler, 1996; Krisnan et al., 2001; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986), but there are certain family and gender roles that are expected in rural communities. Exploring the rural beliefs that these women have been immersed in would be important in order to help these women move forward. Through this research it became clear that despite all of the abuse and stigma that these women experienced, they were still able to identify some personal strength within themselves. This would be important for counsellors and service providers to recognize and explore in order to continue empowering the women in their decisions and their journeys.

This study also brings forth the reality that many rural women, as well as the general community members, do not understand domestic abuse and may not even realize that they are experiencing it. Hage (2006) suggested that providing education and language around domestic abuse so that the women can finally name it and talk about it is an empowering experience for those fleeing abusive relationships. This study would certainly support this notion, seeing that the majority of the participants, both the rural

women and service providers, identified a lack of knowledge or understanding of domestic abuse. Service provider participants in this study noted that it takes weeks to convince some rural women that they were being abused and it was unsafe and unhealthy for them to return to the relationship. Counsellors and other service providers who educate rural women about domestic abuse could better help women leave their relationships and empower them to stay out.

Finally, the results of this study are important for not only the rural service providers and counsellors but also those in urban areas. This current study, as well as past research (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, 2011a), has found that women often have to flee their communities entirely. This is both for the woman's safety because of the visibility in small towns, but also due to the lack of resources (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, 2011a). As there are only 35 women's shelters in Alberta, 12 of which are in Calgary and Edmonton, rural women must travel to these urban areas for help. Therefore, it is vital that counsellors and service providers in urban areas are aware of the distinct barriers that rural women face in abusive relationship and in fleeing.

Policy. The Family Violence Initiative (FVI) was an initiative put forth by 15 federal departments lead by the Public Health Agency of Canada (Department of Justice Canada, 2012). The purpose of the FVI was to contribute to the knowledge about family violence issues, to strengthen communities and justice systems, and to improve policy as contributions to knowledge of family violence impacts federal policy and responsibilities (Department of Justice Canada, 2012). The FVI reported progress in enhancing public and professional awareness and understanding and in addressing family violence specifically in Aboriginal and rural communities. This current study supports that

progress needs to continue in this area. Four groups that were identified as important to consider when studying the impact of violence-related issues are (a) women, (b) children, (c) Aboriginal people, and (d) individuals who may be at a disadvantage in dealing with the justice system. Rural women could certainly be considered as a disadvantaged group for dealing with the justice system due to lack of services available in their communities as well as a lack of knowledge about their rights and the law. Given the findings and the suggestions put forth by the FVI, it appears that this study could contribute to rural policy on family violence.

In this study, all the women and service providers were asked what suggestions they would make to the government about resources needed in their communities. The responses varied slightly, but the consensus was that better transportation and more second-stage housing are needed. These seemed to be common resources that most of the communities and women lacked, and perhaps funding could be considered for these resources in small communities. Participants also indicated that better implemented outreach work could benefit the rural women. All the service providers recognized that the pilot stations and limited office hours for many of the essential resources were major barriers for the women in their communities, particularly for Aboriginal women who lack support groups and culturally-specific counselling. The FVI identified Aboriginal populations as one of the groups that require specialized responses when dealing with family violence. According to Statistics Canada (2006), Alberta has the third largest Aboriginal population in Canada, and Aboriginal women are more than twice as likely to be report having been the victim of domestic abuse (Statistics Canada, 2008a, 2011d).

Another major issue that was found in the study was the lack of anonymity and confidentiality when accessing resources. The women and the service providers saw this as a major obstacle. A specific barrier in relation to family violence identified by the FVI is the exercise of police and prosecutor discretion (Department of Justice Canada, 2012). According to the results of this study, I believe considering the improvement of discretion and confidentiality would have a positive impact on the use of resources in rural communities.

Implications for Knowledge

Within the realm of domestic abuse, this study on rural women's experiences makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study added to the minimal research that has been done on rural domestic abuse in Canada. Much of the research on the experiences of women living with and leaving domestic abuse has focused on urban populations. With 19% of Canada's population considered to be rural (Statistics Canada, 2011b), it is important that the perceptions of the rural population are also understood. In this study the definition of rural encompassed "rural and small town" (du Plessis et al., 2001, p. 1); as such, the implications are even more relevant and impactful, as according to the majority of the participants in this study, the same concerns exist. This suggests that the unique challenges faced by rural women leaving domestic abuse are more extensively applicable.

The findings of how social stigma affects rural women and their self-worth are also important to this area of knowledge. More research is vital in order to educate professionals as well as the general public of the realities of domestic abuse in rural towns. It is especially important for service providers in more urban areas to understand

the effects of the stigmas that are present in small communities, since they do not live in or experience these stigmas themselves. Lack of resources has been a more common focus in research about rural domestic abuse; however, the results of this study strongly focused on stereotypes and confidentiality. Even with the range in population sizes that participants came from, all participants expressed concerns of confidentiality, in part due to stigma and rural beliefs. While lack of resources was certainly a major barrier for the women in this study, participants clearly stated that the concerns about stigma hindered them from accessing those resources that were available.

Strengths

This study had several strengths that are important to identify. Each of the strengths are discussed below.

Contributes to limited research. Although it is important, research on the experiences of rural women who have left domestic abuse in Canada is scarce. This study supports not only previous research on domestic abuse but more specifically it supports the understudied rural population. This research helps to explore a population that is quite prominent in Canada, providing various service providers and professionals with new information as well as promoting further research in the area.

Triangulation. A second strength of this study is the use of the perspectives of both the rural women and the rural service providers. The triangulation that took place between the two groups of participants increased the validity of the study. While I found it important in this research to provide a chance for the women to share their stories, the experiences and perspectives of the service providers who shared what they see in their communities and from other rural women further supported the findings based on the

rural women's stories. This provided a wider range of experiences that uncovered strong similarities as well as gaps in perspectives that should be addressed.

Focus on stigma. Finally, this study had a focus on both social and felt stigma that exists for this population. Few studies consider the intrusive and debilitating stigma and misconceptions that exist in rural communities surrounding domestic abuse. In this study, the stereotypes were a prominent theme and concern from the perspectives of both the rural women and service providers, suggesting further research should be done in this area.

Limitations

Despite the identified strengths, this study also had several limitations. Many of these limitations were connected to the time constraints on the study as well as the recruitment process, which was longer than I had expected. Each of the identified limitations is discussed below.

Sampling limitations. There were a number of limitations regarding the recruitment of participants in this study. To begin, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, my supervisor and I felt it was important to advertise for the study as discretely as possible. This limited participant recruitment to the use of service providers and advertising within what was felt to be safe environments. Having to rely on service providers to pass the information on by word of mouth reduced the visibility of the study. The need to reach out to the appropriate service providers in rural communities was a struggle, as there were limited services available in the rural areas. Although information and requests were sent to service providers across the province, only a small number replied. Further to this, in many of the rural communities, second-stage housing did not

exist, and the shelters had a limit of a 30-day stay; therefore, many of the women using this particular service did not meet the participant requirements. After 3 months of contacting service providers and offices requesting advertisement for the study, only one participant had been confirmed. At this time my supervisor and I was decided that the participant pool would have to be opened up to service providers as well.

Interview limitations. Originally, I had expected to be able to travel to each of the participants in order to conduct interviews. However, due to the time constraints that developed with the delays in participant recruitment this was not possible. Therefore, several interviews were completed via telephone. I found the telephone interviews were not ideal, as the telephone limited my ability to connect with the interviewee, and I felt that it in some ways the telephone interviews impacted the narrative approach of this inquiry. Further to this, the quality of the audio recordings of the telephone interviews was diminished.

Narrative approach. I conducted this study with the intent of completing interviews with a narrative approach. This proved to be effective in some interviews, but less so in others. Due to the previously mentioned time and travel constraints, some of the interviews were completed via telephone. The telephone interview participants seemed to require more prompting than those who were interviewed in person, which, as the researcher, I attribute to the barrier of not being able to portray attentiveness and provide minimal encouragers when conducting interviews. Further, the narrative approach seemed to be less effective with the service providers. I believe that this is due to the service providers' perspectives being more formal, as they were often sharing other people's stories. These participants provided information based on the experiences of

women that they had met as well as more factual knowledge on the issues in rural communities.

Researcher's Journey

At this moment, attempting to write about my experience as a researcher in conducting this study, I am at a loss as to where to begin. I had expected to experience a range of emotions throughout this research, listening to women's stories and understanding their struggles for leaving abuse. I did not, however, expect the extent of emotions and struggles on my part when simply attempting to reach out and make this research come together.

There were many times over the months of attempting to recruit participants and then again after when organizing interviews that I felt so unbearably discouraged by the process that I never thought the study would be completed. When I finally began my travels for interviews, I began excited and enthusiastic about my 880-km weekend. Halfway to my first destination I discovered that my recorder would not turn on, despite having worked that morning, so I began the process of convincing myself that everything would work out, and in the end I would be happy to have completed this.

While the process of waiting for participants was quite discouraging at times, I spent a lot of time reflecting on my interviews after they were all completed. Overall, when I look back on how I conducted the interviews, there is a part of me that is relieved they had happened later than I had originally planned. When I began this research I had identified that it would be vital that I was able to strike a balance between my counsellor skills and my researcher skills. I felt it was important that I ask questions and probe further in the stories only for the purpose of answering my research questions, as opposed

to satisfying my curiosity or for processing information. In retrospect, I feel as though I performed better as a researcher than I would have in the earlier months when I was also beginning my internship and starting my practice as a counsellor. When I conducted the interviews I felt more comfortable in my role as a counsellor, and I believed that I was better able to "turn it off," in a sense, for the interviews.

As I searched for the appropriate resources to advertise my study, and even more so in my travels for interviews, I began to notice parallels in the frustration I was experiencing and the barriers I heard the rural women say that they faced. The inability to find shelters and offices in rural communities to seek participants was a part of the reason that it took longer than expected to acquire participants. From the frustration that I experienced, I cannot even imagine what rural women fleeing abuse must experience.

Throughout the interviews I was constantly amazed by the women's stories and their strength in surviving and moving forward with their lives. I was amazed and honoured by their willingness to share their stories with me and their desire to have their experiences contribute to research that could help other rural women. As I began to listen to the interviews again for the purpose of transcription and analysis I was again struck by the strength and the perseverance of these women. This experience affected me both in my desire to research this topic further and it has also contributed to the shaping of my career goals as a future psychologist.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has provided insight into the experiences of rural women leaving domestic abuse as well as the service providers in these same areas. Using du Plessis et al.'s (2001) "rural and small town" (p. 1) definition proved to be useful, as many of the

participants indicated that despite living and working in the communities that were on the larger end of the scale there were particular barriers to leaving domestic abuse or providing services. This indicates the importance of carefully considering the definition of rural used when moving forward with research in this area of domestic abuse.

Considering the permeation of social and felt stigma and their impact on the rural women leaving domestic abuse, I suggest that it is imperative to continue to explore this area of the research. Future research should further pursue how stigma and stereotypes contribute to abused women's self-esteem, leave taking, and understanding of abuse. This study brought to light the lack of knowledge or education on domestic abuse in rural areas. The women as well as the service providers identified a lack of awareness of domestic abuse, its definition and components, and how this lack of knowledge contributes to stereotypes in the small communities. Future research could consider how furthering the understanding of domestic abuse can be integrated into the education in small communities.

Finally, the possible discrepancy in beliefs about variance between urban and rural populations was briefly considered in this study. Since rural women often have to utilize services in larger communities as well as the urban centres, it is important to pursue research considering the differences in understanding between service providers and rural women. The concern being that if service providers do not believe that there is a major difference between rural and urban women fleeing domestic violence, there could be a lack of appropriate services being provided.

Conclusion

Through this study rural women were given the opportunity to share their stories of leaving domestic abuse. These stories along with the perspectives of the service providers contributed to the understanding of the barriers faced by rural women leaving domestic abuse. The results of this study were consistent with past literature on domestic abuse, in particular the research on rural issues in this area (Coyer et al., 2006; Eastman & Grant Bunch, 2007; Krishnan et al., 2001; Logan et al., 2003; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). This study uncovered a number of themes that represented the experiences of rural women who have left abusive relationships.

Rural women face a number of similar barriers to those experienced by urban women leaving domestic abuse, as well as other challenges unique to rural populations. The study concluded that rural women face a lack of confidentiality and anonymity, minimal resources or lessened accessibility, strong social and felt stigmas, geographical and social isolation, and inadequate knowledge about domestic abuse. However, despite all of these barriers, the women in this study were able to recognize their personal strengths that helped them to survive domestic abuse.

With domestic abuse continuing to be an issue in today's society and with a considerable portion of Canada's population being rural, it is vital that professionals and the general population have a better understanding of the perspectives of these women and those who help them. Having a better comprehension of the distinctive barriers can help provide better formal support for women in this difficult predicament. Understanding these barriers can also contribute to an increased understanding of abuse

in rural areas that will reduce acceptance and dismissal of abuse, thereby offering better

social support.

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Appendix A: Handout Provided to Service Providers

Master's Thesis Study: Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse

Purpose

To uncover the stories of women living in rural communities who have survived domestic abuse. Through the stories this study will aim to understand what challenges and barriers these rural women endured when seeking help, escaping the abuse, and overcoming their obstacles. The study will also look at what formal and informal resources/supports that rural women need when leaving abusive situations.
The definition that I am using to define rural is the Rural and Small Town definition (Du Plessis et al., 2001): *Areas outside of Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) and Census Agglomerations (CAs). CMAs have a population of 100,000 or more with a core of 50,000 and CAs have a core population of 10,000 plus.*

The overarching research question posed is: What challenges do women in rural communities face when seeking help for domestic abuse?

Secondary questions include:
  (a) What formal and informal resources did they draw on for leaving the abusive situation?
  (b) What social supports did participants identify as helpful when leaving participants abusive relationships?
  (c) What was the perceived impact of social and felt stigma on their decisions to leave? and
  (d) What strengths did the survivors recognize within themselves that help them to leave the abusive environment?

Why is this research important?

This research is important since it has been reported that approximately 12% of violent crimes Canada are domestic abuse and only an estimated 22% of all domestic abuse incidents are reported to police. While there is a significant amount of research on domestic abuse, it mainly focuses on urban women without considering the unique needs of rural women. Between 2006 and 2008 there were consistently higher rates of domestic abuse in rural communities in comparison to urban. With a reported one in five women in Canada living in rural areas, it is clear that we need to have a better understanding of their unique needs.

How you can help

As an agency or professional I am reaching out for your help in passing along information about my study so that I am able to find women willing to take part in my study. At the end of my thesis I would be able to provide you with information about what rural women require when leaving domestic abuse. This study will provide

information for psychotherapists and other professional helpers so that they may provide an enhanced quality of service to rural women who have experienced domestic abuse. Benefits to the state of knowledge include building upon knowledge of rural women's challenges and barriers when accessing help for domestic abuse and the impact of enacted and felt stigma on decisions to leave as well as coping strategies used.

Participation

Participant requirements:
- have left an abusive relationship while living in a rural community,
- 18 years of age or older, and
- have left the abusive relationship at least 3 months ago.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and will involve taking part in an individual interview in which participants will tell their story of leaving an abusive relationship. The interview will be audio-tape recorded. The interviews will be anonymous and confidential. The interview is estimated to take approximately $1 - 2$ hours and will take place in a private place that is convenient for the participant. Due to the emotional nature of the interview, participants can withdraw at any time or we can pause the tape recorder and take a break.
In addition to the interview there will be the option of arranging a 30 minute meeting to review the transcribed interview and to ensure that I am accurately representing participants and what they intend to convey.

Findings

My findings will be reported in my Master's thesis which will be made available in the University of Lethbridge Library, Results will also be presented in my oral thesis defense. I plan to write at least one scholarly article to be published in a peer reviewed academic journal. I may also present the results at one or more academic conferences.

How to participate

If you or someone you know matches the above requirements and would be interested in becoming a participant in the study "Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse" or would like more information I would be happy to speak to you. Participants must be willing to tell their story of leaving domestic abuse while living in a rural community. Please contact me via email [email address] or telephone [telephone number].

Appendix B: Invitational Poster

Study: Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse

Gail Bailey
Graduate Student
Department of Education
University of Lethbridge
[Address]
[Email address]

Participant requirements:
- you have left an abusive relationship while living in a rural community,
- you are 18 years of age or older, and
- you have left the abusive relationship at least 3 months ago

My name is Gail Bailey and I am M.Ed. in Counselling Psychology student at the University of Lethbridge. I am completing this study for my Masters' Thesis.

This purpose of this research study is to uncover the stories of women living in rural communities who have survived domestic abuse. Through women's stories this study will aim to understand what challenges and barriers these rural women endured when seeking help, escaping the abuse, and overcoming these obstacles. I would like to explore what supports were helpful for you and the personal strengths that helped you to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, I would like to better understand the formal and informal resources that worked and those that were not effective.

Research of this type is important because there is very little research done on domestic abuse in rural communities in Canada. It is important to understand how some women have left domestic abuse and what their experiences were in order to understand how to best help rural women in abusive relationships. This can make contributions to the counselling profession, legal systems, police, and community agencies in how they understand and aid rural women attempting to leave domestic abuse.

Taking part in this study would involve an interview that will be confidential and anonymous. An honorarium of $25.00 will be given to offset the costs of traveling to and from the interview. If you would like to become a participant or would like more information on the study please contact Gail Bailey via email [email address] or telephone [telephone number].

Gail Bailey [email address] [telephone number] (repeated tear-off strips)

Appendix C: Ethical Approval

The University of Lethbridge	**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Gail Bailey
FROM: Kerry Bernes
Date: December 11, 2012

RE: Human Subject Research Application:
"Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse"

The Faculty of Education Human Subject Committee has **approved** your **revised** HSR application. The approval adheres to the Tri-Council Policy Statement, published on the website
http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/

Good luck with your research.

_____
Kerry Bernes, Ph.D.
Chair Human Subject Committee
Faculty of Education

Cc: Graduate Studies
             Blythe Shepard, supervisor

Appendix D: Informed Consent – Rural Women

Rural Women

Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled ***Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse*** that is being conducted by Gail Bailey. Gail Bailey is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone [telephone number] or email [email address].

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Blythe Shepard. You may contact my supervisor by telephone [telephone number] or email [email address]. This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through a Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

This purpose of this research study is to uncover the stories of women living in rural communities who have survived domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is defined as: "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (United Nations, 1993, p. 4).

Through the women's stories this study will aim to understand what challenges and barriers these rural women endured when seeking help, escaping the abuse, and overcoming these obstacles. I would like to explore what supports were helpful for you and the personal strengths that helped you to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, I would like to better understand the formal and informal resources that worked and those that were not effective.

The research questions include: What challenges do women in rural communities face when seeking help for domestic abuse? Secondary questions include: (a) What formal and informal resources do they draw on? (b) What social supports help participants leave abusive relationships? (c) What is the impact of social and felt stigma on their decisions to leave? (d) What strengths do the survivors recognize within themselves that help them to leave the abusive environment? and (e) What are the perspectives of service providers who work with rural women leaving abusive situations?

Research of this type is important because there is very little research done on domestic abuse in rural communities in Canada. It is important to understand how some women have left domestic abuse and what their experiences were in order to understand how to best help rural women in abusive relationships. This can make contributions to the

counselling profession, legal systems, police, and community agencies in how they understand and aid rural women attempting to leave domestic abuse.

You were selected for this research because:
- you have left an abusive relationship while living in a rural community,
- you are 18 years of age or older, and
- you have left the abusive relationship at least 3 months ago.

Your story although unique to you, can help me to understand more about the experiences of rural women leaving or attempting to leave domestic abuse.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include being interviewed individually in a private place that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio-tape recorded. I anticipate that the interview will take from one to two hours to complete (including the time for going through informed consent and for debriefing at the end of the interview). If you are interested, an additional 30 minutes can be arranged to review the transcribed interview and to ensure that I am accurately representing what you intended to convey.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including up to two hours of your time, plus travel time to and from the designated place agreed upon for the interview. If you agree to the additional member-checking meeting, this will require approximately an additional 30 minutes plus travel time.

Because I will ask you to think reflectively about your experiences in relationship to the research questions posed, potential risks associated with participation include possible psychological and emotional discomfort. Topics discussed in the interview may bring up feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt, fear, or shame, for example. Issues or uncomfortable thoughts that had been buried might be brought to surface. Consequently, the impact of these feelings may affect social functioning.

Participants are free to withdraw at any time during the interview without penalty or explanation. If you become distressed at any time during the interview, we can take a break from the interview. I will turn off the tape recorder, and check in with you, offer you a chance to do some deep breathing, get a drink of water, or withdraw from the study if desired. Furthermore, you, the participant, also have control of the tape recorder, and may turn it off at any time.

At the end of each interview, a list of community resources will be provided including free and sliding-scale counselling services, and the number to the local crisis hotline. Please use these resources and talk to a counsellor if you feel that our interview has brought up any uncomfortable feelings.

Personal benefits may include emotional and/or psychological growth through being able to talk openly to an unbiased party about your experience of domestic abuse. Benefits to society may include informing psychotherapists and other professional helpers so that they may provide an enhanced quality of service to rural women who have experienced domestic abuse. Benefits to the state of knowledge include building upon knowledge of rural women's challenges and barriers when accessing help for domestic abuse and the impact of enacted and felt stigma on decisions to leave as well as coping strategies used. Such findings can be published in academic journals

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given an honorarium of $25.00 to offset the costs of traveling to and from the interview. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. Please stop me at any time if you are no longer comfortable answering the questions. You may drop out of the study at any time, including during or after the interview without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the analysis.

If you withdraw during the interview, or within six weeks afterward, your data will not be used in the study. After six weeks from the time of the interview, the data will not be able to be removed, as it may be integrated in with the other data.

You mentioned that you would like to be contacted after the study to ensure that your transcript describes what you intended to say. Are you still interested in meeting to go over your transcript? If not, there will be no negative consequences.

You will be given an opportunity to choose pseudonyms for yourself and your partner. During the audio-recorded interviews, only these pseudonyms will be used. Only I will be transcribing the interviews and the only person to listen to the taped interviews. All audio recordings of the interviews will be password protected on my computer. A record of your name and contact information, transcripts, and the signed consent form will be kept in a locked file cabinet or lock-box, and viewed only by my supervisor and me. Identifying information from the interview will not be included in the final report.

The data will be referenced to individual participants using pseudonyms only. Any private data that allows any individual to be identified by the public will not be reported. The audio-recorded interviews and transcribed interviews will be on my personal password-protected computer. The audio recording will be listened to only by myself, my supervisor, and a transcriber who has signed a confidentiality waiver. The audio-recordings will be destroyed following the completion of my thesis.

The data collected in this study will be used for my thesis for my Master of Education in Counselling Psychology. It will be made available in print in the University of Lethbridge Library. I will also present my results in my oral defense.

Upon completion of my study all hard copies of data including informed consent forms and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic data will be password protected for five years. After this the electronic data will be permanently deleted from my computer and all hard copies will be shredded.

The data will be used in my Master's thesis, which will be written up and dispersed to some members of the University of Lethbridge faculty. My thesis will also be made available to other students and members of the public through the University of Lethbridge library. I plan to write at least one scholarly article to be published in a peer-reviewed academic journal. I may also present the results of my thesis at one or more academic conferences. Please e-mail me if you would like an electronic copy of the results, and I will send it upon completion.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge [telephone number].

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| *Name of Participant* | *Signature* | *Date* |

Appendix E: Informed Consent – Service Providers

Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled ***Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse*** that is being conducted by Gail Bailey. Gail Bailey is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone [telephone number] or email [email address].

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Blythe Shepard. You may contact my supervisor by telephone [telephone number] or email [email address]. This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through a Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

This purpose of this research study is to uncover the stories of women living in rural communities who have survived domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is defined as: "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (United Nations, 1993, p. 4).

I aim to understand what challenges and barriers these rural women endured when seeking help, escaping the abuse, and overcoming these obstacles. I would like to explore what supports were helpful for these women and the personal strengths that helped them to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, I would like to better understand the formal and informal resources that worked and those that were not effective. The perspective of service providers will be helpful to professionals such as counsellors, law enforcement, and shelter coordinators in order to provide information about resources/supports that are needed by rural women leaving abusive situations as well as the barriers that were encountered.

The research questions include: What challenges do women in rural communities face when seeking help for domestic abuse? Secondary questions include: (a) What formal and informal resources do they draw on? (b) What social supports help participants leave abusive relationships? (c) What is the impact of social and felt stigma on their decisions to leave? (d) What strengths do the survivors recognize within themselves that help them to leave the abusive environment? and (e) What are the perspectives of service providers who work with rural women leaving abusive situations?

Research of this type is important because there is very little research done on domestic abuse in rural communities in Canada. It is important to understand how some women have left domestic abuse and what their experiences were in order to understand how to best help rural women in abusive relationships. This can make contributions to the

counselling profession, legal systems, police, and community agencies in how they understand and aid rural women attempting to leave domestic abuse.

You were selected for this research because:
- you provide some service to rural women who have left or are attempting to leave abusive situations,
- you are 18 years of age or older, and

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include being interviewed individually in a private place that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio-tape recorded and take about 1 to 2 hours of your time. I anticipate that the interview will take from one to two hours to complete (including the time for going through informed consent and for debriefing at the end of the interview). If you are interested, an additional 30 minutes can be arranged to review the transcribed interview and to ensure that I am accurately representing what you intended to convey.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including up to two hours of your time, plus travel time to and from the designated place agreed upon for the interview. If you agree to the additional member-checking meeting, this will require approximately an additional 30 minutes plus travel time.

Because I will ask you to think reflectively about your experiences in relationship to the research questions posed, potential risks associated with participation include possible psychological and emotional discomfort. Topics discussed in the interview may bring up feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt, fear, or shame, for example. Issues or uncomfortable thoughts that had been buried might be brought to surface. Consequently, the impact of these feelings may affect social functioning.

Participants are free to withdraw at any time during the interview without penalty or explanation. If you become distressed at any time during the interview, we can take a break from the interview. I will turn off the tape recorder, and check in with you, offer you a chance to do some deep breathing, get a drink of water, or withdraw from the study if desired. Furthermore, you, the participant, also have control of the tape recorder, and may turn it off at any time.

At the end of each interview, a list of community resources will be provided including free and sliding-scale counselling services, and the number to the local crisis hotline. Please use these resources and talk to a counsellor if you feel that our interview has brought up any uncomfortable feelings.

Personal benefits may include emotional and/or psychological growth through being able to talk openly to an unbiased party about your experience of domestic abuse. Benefits to society may include informing psychotherapists and other professional helpers so that they may provide an enhanced quality of service to rural women who have experienced

domestic abuse. Benefits to the state of knowledge include building upon knowledge of rural women's challenges and barriers when accessing help for domestic abuse and the impact of enacted and felt stigma on decisions to leave as well as coping strategies used. Such findings can be published in academic journals

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given an honorarium of $25.00 to offset the costs of traveling to and from the interview. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. Please stop me at any time if you are no longer comfortable answering the questions. You may drop out of the study at any time, including during or after the interview without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the analysis.

If you withdraw during the interview, or within four weeks afterward, your data will not be used in the study. After six weeks from the time of the interview, the data will not be able to be removed, as it may be integrated in with the other data.

You mentioned that you would like to be contacted after the study to ensure that your transcript describes what you intended to say. Are you still interested in meeting to go over your transcript? If not, there will be no negative consequences.

You will be given an opportunity to choose pseudonyms for yourself and anyone else involved. During the audio-recorded interviews, only these pseudonyms will be used. Only myself or a transcriber who has signed a confidentiality waiver will be transcribing the interviews and will be the only people to listen to the taped interviews. All audio recordings of the interviews will be password protected on my computer. A record of your name and contact information, transcripts, and the signed consent form will be kept in a locked file cabinet or lock-box, and viewed only by my supervisor and me. Identifying information from the interview will not be included in the final report.

The data will be referenced to individual participants using pseudonyms only. Any private data that allows any individual to be identified by the public will not be reported. The audio-recorded interviews and transcribed interviews will be on my personal password-protected computer. The audio recording will be listened to only by myself, my supervisor, and a transcriber who has signed a confidentiality waiver. The audio-recordings will be destroyed following the completion of my thesis.

The data collected in this study will be used for my thesis for my Master of Education in Counselling Psychology. It will be made available in print in the University of Lethbridge Library. I will also present my results in my oral defense.

Upon completion of my study all hard copies of data including informed consent forms and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic data will be password protected for five years. After this the electronic data will be permanently deleted from my computer and all hard copies will be shredded.

The data will be used in my Master's thesis, which will be written up and dispersed to some members of the University of Lethbridge faculty. My thesis will also be made available to other students and members of the public through the University of Lethbridge library. I plan to write at least one scholarly article to be published in a peer-reviewed academic journal. I may also present the results of my thesis at one or more academic conferences. Please e-mail me if you would like an electronic copy of the results, and I will send it upon completion.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge [telephone number].

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   *Signature*   *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix F: Pilot Transcript Coding Sample

Traits/Escalation of Abuse: any acts or characteristics of abuse
Resources: formal and informal supports available or unavailable
Personal Characteristics: strengths displayed by women in leaving and surviving
Emotions & Feelings: impact of abuse on participant's affect
Reasons for Leaving: specific incidents that influenced leaving relationship

K: okay so yeah the final kind of attack was August, the end of August, August 30th, and

I my god we had been fighting all day, we had several fights throughout the day, we were

fighting, my daughter was teething at the same time so she was having a really tough

time sleeping so a lot of noises would wake her up. We had been outside working all

night doing yard work and we came inside and getting ready for bed and my daughter

woke up and I was trying to take care of her and uhm her dad came out my ex and just

said we got in an argument he was blaming me for being the root cause of problems and

the reason why he was always angry and just that sort of thing. And I said I'm like that's

your own deal no one makes you angry except for yourself *indecipherable* he starts

dragging me around the house while I was still holding my daughter. And ah he was

really like demanding to hold her and I said no you're not you're too angry.

indecipherable I went into her room and had my back to him and he started hitting me

in the back of the head. Then he said things to me like give her to me or I'll break your

neck and I said no no you're too angry. And that that point he put his arms around my

neck and started strangling me and I started coughing and my vision went black so I was

blacking out and uh at that point he let go and he said I'm going to kill myself I'm going

to get into a collision on the highway. I said you do that you're a coward, and I'm telling

your family because they have the decency to know what you're doing and so I was

looking for the house phone and he went through the house and took all the phones and

he took off. And I remember I ran out in the yard and <u>I was just crying</u> and it was dark

and no one was around and I just didn't know what else to do. So I came inside and <u>I</u>

<u>called my parents</u> and it was in the night and at first my dad was just wondering what's

with the phone call. John and I had a <u>fight he told me he was going to kill himself I was</u>

<u>more concerned</u> with what he said and what he said he was going to do than anything.

<u>And then I asked my dad if her had ever hit my mom in all the years they had been</u>

<u>married and I think at that point it just I finally realized something wasn't right</u>

Appendix G: Interview Guide – Rural Women

When you were leaving your abusive relationship, what was that like for you?

What challenges or barriers do you remember that may have made leaving or getting help more difficult?

What about the resources and supports that were available? Tell me about those.

What personal strengths do you recognize in yourself that helped you leave?

Coming from a rural community what formal resources do you feel were missing?

What informal resources did you use (i.e., family, friends, etc.)?

Tell me about any social stigma (misconceptions or beliefs) about abuse you feel existed or exists in your community?

How did this social stigma impact you?

What about any personal stigmas you have or had toward domestic abuse?

Is there anything you would like to add or do you have any questions for me?

Appendix H: Interview Guide – Service Providers

From your experience what challenges or barriers do you identify that rural women face when attempting to leave domestic abuse?

What resources and supports are available in the community you currently work in or in previous rural communities you have worked in?

What personal strengths or characteristics do you see in these women that helped them to leave?

In your experience working in a rural community what formal resources do you believe are missing?

What informal resources do rural women tend to report using (i.e., friends, family, etc.)?

Tell me about any social stigma/stereotypes (misconceptions, beliefs) about abuse you feel existed or exists in the community that you work in?

What is the impact of social stigma on the women who are attempting to leave domestic abuse?

Can you discuss how personal beliefs and understandings of domestic abuse affect rural women in leaving an abusive situations?

As a service provider what struggles or barriers do you encounter when trying to aid rural women in leaving domestic abuse or after they have left?

Is there anything you would like to add or do you have any questions for me?

Appendix I: Confidentiality Waiver

The Experiences of Rural Women Leaving Domestic Abuse

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

[Transcriber Name] you are being invited to the position of transcriber in a study entitled **The Experiences of Rural women Leaving Domestic Abuse** that is being conducted by Gail Bailey Graduate Student in the Master of Education Counselling Psychology Program at the University of Lethbridge.

This research is important since it has been reported that approximately 12% of violent crimes in Canada are domestic abuse and only an estimated 22% of all domestic abuse incidents are reported to police. While there is a significant amount of research on domestic abuse, it mainly focuses on urban women without considering the unique needs of rural women. Between 2006 and 2008 there were consistently higher rates of domestic abuse in rural communities in comparison to urban. With a reported one in five women in Canada living in rural areas, it is clear that we need to have a better understanding of their unique needs.

My findings will be reported in my Master's thesis which will be made available in the University of Lethbridge Library, results will also be presented in my oral thesis defense. I plan to write at least one scholarly article to be published in a peer reviewed academic journal. I may also present the results at one or more academic conferences.

I, _____, the *Transcriber*, agree to:

1. Keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or formal (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.

2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.

3. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.

4. After consulting with the *Researcher,* erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher* (e.g. information store on computer hard drive).

   Transcriber
   [Name] _____ _____ _____
             (Print Name)   (Signature)   (Date)

   Transcriber
   [Name] _____ _____ _____
             (Print Name)   (Signature)   (Date)

If you have any questions or concern about this study please contact:
[Researcher]
Graduate Student
[Address]
[Phone Number]
[Email Address]

This study has been reviewed and approved by the research Ethics Board of the Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge. For questions regarding participants' rights and ethical conduct of research please contact [Assistant Dean] – Graduate Studies and Research Office:
[Address] [Phone Number] [Email].

Appendix J: Rural Women Transcript Coding Sample

<u>Stigma</u>

<u>Traits/Escalation of Abuse</u>

<u>Resources</u>

J: Uhm, you know, when you go through it you know it's not right but it isn't the forefront of what you think. What you think is that somehow, because he was abused by his first two wives and everything else, <u>you try to make up for that. You try to be a better wife, you try to be a better partner, you try to be that better person and then when it goes south</u> and the hardest thing that it took me to understand, is <u>that what happened when you're under domestic violence is not your fault</u>. That's the hardest part for me because, when in reality, <u>you're always accountable for your actions right</u>? <u>You're always accountable but in this case you're not accountable, because you made the wrong choice and the manipulation starts</u>, like I said, April things were great and then <u>when he married me it was like he owned me</u> and then being in a rural community, it's like, everybody knows everybody. <u>If you go to the women shelter, they know that there is, that you have issues</u>. I'm not a person that thinks before she talks, and I just say "you know what, I'm just going to the women shelter" that's all I say and then I go so it's like, everyone knows once you <u>go to the women's shelter that you have some heavy shit, so that point is that they're wondering what did he do to you</u>.