The Experiences of Taiwanese Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence

Hsiu-Fen Hsieh • Jui-Ying Feng* • Bih-Ching Shu**

ABSTRACT

Background: Domestic violence has a history that stretches back before recorded time. It frequently has a lasting and traumatic impact on victims, families, and communities. According to the official statistics of many countries, most domestic violence victims are women who were assaulted by intimate male partners. This issue is gaining increasing attention in Taiwan’s current society.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain an empathic understanding of domestic violent abuse experienced by women in southern Taiwan. Perspectives were provided through the personal descriptions and views of the women interviewed.

Methods: P.F. Colaizzi’s (1976) descriptive phenomenological method was applied to conduct this study. A total of eight abused women from the southern Taiwan Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Center participated in this study and associated in-depth interviews, which were tape-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by the interviewee. Verbatim manuscript transcriptions were then analyzed. Finally, major themes from extracted data were summarized.

Results: The following four themes emerged: feeling sorry about their marriage, living in an unsafe environment, economic difficulties, and enduring unhappy lives.

Conclusions/Implications: These results may help health professionals understand the assault experiences and the nature of domestic violence from victims’ viewpoints. This may also help health professionals obtain a comprehensive assessment and develop appropriate interventions for these abused women.

Key Words: abused women, domestic violence, phenomenology, abuse experience.

Introduction

Domestic violence has been a ubiquitous phenomenon within the family for millennia and has been widely reported internationally and across cultures, with a broad range of lifetime prevalence varying from 13% to 71% (Garcia-Moreno, Heise, Jansen, Ellsberg, & Watts, 2005; Hazen & Soriano, 2007; Laughon et al., 2007; World Health Organization [WHO], 2002, 2005). Most domestic violence victims are women who are assaulted by their intimate male partners.

The reported number of domestic violence victims has increased annually in recent decades in many countries including Taiwan (Clements & Sawhney, 2000; Dienemann et al., 2000; Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan, ROC, 2007; Sutherland, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2002). Official statistics reveal an increasing number of victims being reported, with 80% of these women (Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan, ROC, 2007).

In the past, domestic violence in Taiwan was regarded under traditional Chinese culture mores as a derisory and private affair within the family. The woman’s status was considered subordinate, and as such, she was expected to adhere to the “three obediences and four virtues.” Wife beating was a socially accepted behavior in traditional Taiwanese society (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999). With social developments and increasing attention being paid to this social problem, domestic violence is now considered a major public health issue of great importance (WHO, 2002, 2005).

Past investigations have validated that domestic violence may lead not only to negative physical effects, such as injury, sexually transmitted diseases, and even death, but also to mental consequences, such as depression, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell, 2002; Coker, Weston, Creson, Justice, & Blakeney, 2005; Lown & Vega, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). The physical and the mental health effects of violence result in poor quality of life (Campbell, 2002; Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Dienemann et al., 2000; Fisher & Regan, 2006; Tollestrup et al., 1999). Most prior studies on this issue used quantitative statistics to objectively describe social phenomenon. As such, they have mainly focused on legal, medical, and political topics (Chen, 1992; Chen & Chou, 2006; Chou, 1994; Hou, Chung, & Wang, 2002; Huang et al., 2004; Huang, Chou,
A descriptive phenomenological method was adopted in this study to explore the meaning of the experience for abused women and the quality of the phenomenon. According to phenomenological research, violence in an intimate relationship is regarded as human nature and should be approached with an open mind. The phenomenon was investigated as experienced by the abused women. Another purpose of this study was to understand the nature of the phenomenon in an unpolished manner to be able to describe issues neutrally, free of researchers’ personal opinions and prior hypotheses (Giorgi, 1985).

A phenomenological deep-interview approach was adopted and conducted at a secret and safe place when the abused women’s emotions were in a stable state. The interview outlines included (a) marital history and opinions of their husbands before marriage, (b) assault experiences, (c) perceptions of violence inflicted by their husbands, (d) opinions of such violence held by direct relations, and (e) participants’ attitudes to the future.

**Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from potential participants before commencement of research work. The author informed them that they could withdraw from the study at anytime without explanation. Furthermore, they were informed that interviews were confidential and would be tape-recorded with permission.

**Participants**

All participants were recruited from the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Center in southern Taiwan. They were allowed to tell their experiences of violence in their own words. Interviews were conducted from December 2004 to February 2005. Eligibility requirements for an abused woman to be included in this study included (a) emotionally stable and (b) no mental disorder.

**Interview Protocol**

A semistructured interview was applied in this study. Demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the protocol and then processed as described in the aforementioned outlines.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The first author initially offered the abused women support during the first interview, established a trust relationship, and then let them describe spontaneously their traumatic memories and feelings of violence during the abusive relationship. The author gave them empathy and encouraged them to provide as many details as possible. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was audi-taped with the permission of the participant. Each audiotaped interview was transcribed, and transcripts were analyzed by the author using the descriptive phenomenological method of Colaizzi (1976), a method for understanding information and constructing meanings.

Each interview recording was reviewed by the abused woman for double checking. We examined the exactitude from the four dimensions proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1983), namely, credibility, applicability, consistency, and confirmability. They were as follows:

1. **Credibility**: The first author has more than 14 years of psychiatric nursing care at a teaching hospital dealing with abused women. Through clinical nursing care, the author was well trained to observe the phenomenon and to achieve empathic understanding. She also participated in workshops and seminars on qualitative research before this study. At regular monthly conferences, the author discussed with qualitative research experts the interviews and the observed phenomena and related information in this study. All of these contributed to study credibility.

2. **Applicability**: Each interview was transcribed into verbatim manuscripts. Through these and the observed phenomena, the experiences of participants could be expressed subjectively with minimal researcher prejudice effects. Through the written text, this study could refer materials to other domestic violence experts.

3. **Consistency**: There were many steps in the data collection process, including taping and transcribing each interview into verbatim manuscripts. The author followed up on these cases, examining and analyzing study results with two experts to improve research quality.

4. **Confirmability**: All original data, interview recordings, verbatim manuscripts, and analysis procedures were preserved as the basis for future academic review.

**Results**

A sample of eight abused women participated in this study, and all participants were interviewed face to face without their partners. Their average age was 41 years, ranging from 24 to 55 years. Although all suffered from domestic physical violence, their stories differed from one another. All had at least two children and were exposed to domestic violence for between 3 and 30 years. Two had graduated from junior high school, and the remainder held senior high school degrees. One half of the abused women were divorced at the time of interviews. One of the divorced women and all four married women (62.5%) still lived with their partners (Table 1). Our results comprised four themes as follows: (a) feeling sorry about their marriage, (b) living in an unsafe
Feeling Sorry About Their Marriage

Many abused women had dreamed before marriage that marriage would bring them a new and wonderful life. To the abused women, their marriages seemed a nightmare. A violent husband not only failed to make dreams come true but also destroyed the hopes of a happy future. The abused women regretted their rush decision to get married. If they had taken more time to understand their husbands further and deeper, they might have chosen not to marry their husbands.

We were introduced to each other by a third person. As soon as we got married, we began to quarrel. I argued with my mother. I thought that I made the decision to marry him without careful consideration. This ruined my entire life. I was deceived into thinking that he was trustworthy. He said life in Taiwan was easy and good. He said he was working in Mainland China and Taiwan. He said he was a nice man, would be kind, never lie, and never fool around. He was a reliable man. How come it was so ridiculous? What he had said was full of lies—saying that he had houses ... cars ... it sounded like he was living in a palace, everything was available anytime ... but actually he had nothing. Even his motorcycle belonged to his brother. He is a liar...

He never went home when we were dating, and slept in my brother’s room. My mother said, “Neighbors are gossiping. You two, go ahead and get engaged.” If only I could have known him more and deeper ... because he never showed any aberrant behavior or unusual personal characteristics before our wedding. He was always so appeasing ... never argued or shout me at. If I had been given more time to known him deeper, he might have shown his characteristics and I might not have married him.

Living in an Unsafe Environment

In addition to physical injury in a violent environment, the abused women in this study were afraid of being killed. They felt at the edge of life and death. One of them even attempted suicide to end her life.

He beat me so ... “Hurry up, I needed to call the police to prevent him from further violent behavior... Otherwise, I don’t know what it would be like now!”

This is how I was treated. He said to me, “This is just the beginning. If you do not change, it will be worse...” If I didn’t get away, it would always be this way. A crazy man like him will always make trouble and argue with you...

If I wanted to go away, he would cut the brakes on my motorcycle. Actually, he did it before, which caused me injury in a traffic accident.

I was beaten four times one year. Once he beat me very badly in my parents’ home. My mother

Note. Duration of abuse is defined as years of abuse experienced dated from the first incidence to the most recent time the participant came to the shelter.

TABLE 1. Participant Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case of Violence</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Education (years)</th>
<th>Abuser</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>No. Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Duration of abuse is defined as years of abuse experienced dated from the first incidence to the most recent time the participant came to the shelter.
witnessed the whole event... I told my mother, "I might be beaten to death someday. You may not see me anymore..."

Under these circumstances, I once took drugs to commit suicide. In fact, sometimes what he said really upset me...
the family (Christina et al., 1994; Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997). A woman’s value is sometimes appraised partly by her extent of being favored in a so-called marriage market. Parents of an unmarried daughter are often eager for their daughter’s marriage while still of marrying age in Taiwan (Chao, 2003; Shieh, 2006). In traditional Taiwan society, some people prefer marriage to being single, even if such a marriage is miserable (Christina et al., 1994; Farh et al., 1997).

Living in an Unsafe Environment

One abused woman in this study described the ways that her husband controlled her and forbade her to develop friendships with others. These abused women weighed the pros and cons of leaving their violent husband again and again. They all desired a sense of security and wanted to escape from an unsafe environment. The decision to leave an intimate relationship or not was very difficult to make.

Consistent with the prior studies in Western countries (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Flinck, Paavilainen, & Astedt-Kurki, 2005; Gerlock, 1999), these abused women expressed a concern about being murdered. Studies have shown that, internationally, 40% to 70% female victims of murder were killed by their intimate partners within the context of an abusive relationship (WHO, 2002). Murder is a common cause of death for women between the ages 15 and 34 years and is the most common cause of maternal mortality (WHO, 2002, 2005).

Economic Difficulties

Participants were not well educated or financially independent, resulting in an amplified dependency within their marriage. In addition to physical violence, offenders also tried to limit their wives’ financial support. As the Chinese saying goes, “poor couples, multifarious sorrows.” Economic poverty is very common in families in domestic violence situations. Close to 70% of such families live in poverty and 74.7% argue over financial problems (Aekplakorn & Kongsakon, 2007). The authors of the same study concluded that domestic violence was strongly related to socioeconomic status and that economic difficulties may be a factor triggering domestic violence.

Enduring Unhappy Lives

Divorce itself holds a social stigma for some women in Taiwan. Abused women holding such a mindset are bound to their abusive relationship and sometimes put themselves in danger. Maintaining family integrity is important under traditional mores, even when such is simply superficial integrity (Wu & Yi, 2003). In this study, participants did not want to end abusive relationships by divorce. Ironically, many women were asked by their own parents to stay with their violent partners. Cultural acceptance may be a factor contributing to domestic violence. In many cultures, violence is a socially accepted tool by which husbands control their wives (Koshland, 1994). In a patriarchal culture, a woman’s status is subordinate to that of a man (Jewkes, 2002). This phenomenon is also common in Taiwan (Tien & Wang, 2006).

Our results fit within the concept of “A Web in the Patriarchal Clan System,” proposed by Yoshihama (2005). Under this system, intimate partner violence was regarded as an acceptable social phenomenon, and victims’ parents reinforced their daughters’ submissiveness and tolerance to offenders within an abusive relationship. Such a result was also reflected in Kearney’s (2001) study, which found that intimate partner violence was considered by Cambodian society as temporary and/or reasonable.

Relationships are very important in Chinese society, especially for women. Once they leave a relationship, perceived loneliness increases (Christina et al., 1994). When women make a decision to leave a violent partner, they often consider their family and children before considering their own needs (Bell, Cattaneo, Goodman, & Dutton, 2008).

Taiwan, like other developed countries, recognizes and values the importance of social and economic equal rights and opportunities for both genders. However, policies and laws still favor men even today in Taiwan (Liu, 1995). For example, custody of children is generally awarded to the father after divorce, a policy which indirectly forces abused women to remain in an abusive relationship. Violence against women is a direct and concrete manifestation of inequality between the sexes. Domestic violence is a complex social problem requiring the coordination of the health, education, and justice sectors to challenge the inequalities and the social norms (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005).

Suggestions and Limitations

The findings of this study help raise healthcare provider awareness and understanding with regard to abused women’s lives and assault experience from the women’s personal viewpoints. Listening to the abused women’s voices is important and necessary to offer appropriate interventions. In particular, healthcare providers may help abused women understand the significant impact of patriarchal cultural influences on domestic violence. Healthcare providers should also act as advocates for abused women who seek help and offer alternatives, resources, suggestions, or referrals to appropriate professionals. Healthcare providers need to be trained to be sensitive to domestic violence and to respond appropriately to those who disclose abuse. The authors also
suggest that all abused women should speak out about their experiences and needs. Furthermore, they can seek legal, social, and medical resources to help them heal and recover.

This study was limited by its small sample size, by its homogeneity, and by the circumstances and location of recruitment. In addition, not all abused women seek help from the Domestic Violence Prevention Center. All abused women who participated in this study conveyed a desire to end the abusive relationship and seek help. Their experiences may differ from those who did not go to the Domestic Violence Prevention Center for help. The findings of this study can only represent the experiences of a minority of abused women in Taiwan and cannot be generalized to other settings or cultures.

Cultural and social values have changed significantly over time, and changes are still ongoing. The current results represent a contemporary social phenomena and should be regarded as part of ongoing secular changes in Taiwan.

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References


台灣婦女家庭暴力的經驗

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背景 家庭暴力是世界各地長久以來的社會議題，其中大部份的受害者為女性，而且施暴者通常為男性親密伴侶。此一重大議題現今在台灣亦逐漸受到重視。

目的 本研究主旨透過當事人的角度，以深入了解及描述婦女遭受家庭暴力的經驗。

方法 以Colaizzi的描述現象學進行資料收集與資料分析。研究對象為遭受親密伴侶施暴的婦女，且有意願加入本研究者。共有八位合乎收案資格的婦女接受深度訪談，並同意將訪談過程錄音。研究者將訪談後的內容轉為逐字稿，再進行資料的分析。

結果 將受暴婦女所描述受暴的經驗中，歸納出四個主題，包括：對婚姻感到後悔、活在生死邊緣、經濟困境和對不幸生活的忍耐。

結論／實務應用  藉此研究結果可協助健康專業人員了解這群受暴婦女，未來亦可藉由適當的評估與介入措施，對受暴婦女提供適切的醫療照護。

關鍵詞：受暴婦女、家庭暴力、現象學、受暴經驗。