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When I Was in My Home I Suffered a Lot: Mexican Women's Descriptions of Abuse in Family of Origin

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Abstract: *In this descriptive study we employ episodic narrative interviews and narrative analysis to explore experiences of abuse and violence within the families of origin of Mexican women entering adulthood. Twenty-four Mexican women, 18 years of age and about to graduate from a residential school in central Mexico, were interviewed about life in their families of origin. Participants were from several Mexican states and of low socioeconomic status. Nineteen of the participants described either witnessing or experiencing violence or abuse within their families. We present an analysis of the interviews in which violence or abuse was disclosed. Women who witnessed violence against their mothers did not see this as prescriptive of their own future relationships and articulated strategies for avoiding entering an abusive relationship. Women who experienced nonsexual physical violence described physical violence as punishment. Women who experienced sexual abuse did not provide explanations for the abuse and described being silent in response to the abuse.*

Relationships within one's childhood family have profound influences throughout life. Sequelae related to violence and abuse in a woman's family of origin are well documented in the literature from the United States. Sequelae include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and the possibility of continued difficulties in future intimate relationships. Knowledge about family violence in developing countries is emerging, consisting primarily of quantitative studies about incidence, prevalence, and correlates of violence and abuse. In this qualitative study we seek to describe the experience of abuse and violence within one's family of origin as described by Mexican women who are entering adulthood.

Background

Domestic violence is well documented as a serious problem for women in Mexico. A prevalence study in Durango, Mexico ($n = 384$), reported response rates of 42% for sexual violence, 40% for physical violence, and 39% for emotional violence (Alvarado-Zaldivar, Salvador-Moysen, Estrada-Martinez, & Terrones-Gonzalez, 1998). A similar population-based

study of women in the metropolitan area of Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico ($n = 1,535$), reported a prevalence rate of 35.8% for low- to moderate-level violence and a 9.5% rate for severe violence (Rivera-Rivera et al., 2004). Prevalence of violence against pregnant women in Mexico has been reported from 14.8% to 32% (Castro, Peek-Asa, Garcia, Ruiz, & Kraus, 2003; Castro & Ruiz, 2004).

Qualitative studies from Mexico have focused on perceptions of causes of domestic violence and strategies for coping with violence. Glantz, Halperin, and Hunt (1998) conducted an ethnographic study ($n = 40$) in Chiapas, Mexico. They described participants' thoughts on the nature of domestic violence, its causes/consequences, and strategies to cope with violence. A focus group study in Mexico City ($n = 45$) also reported findings concerning participants' perceptions of the origins of violence and strategies used to confront domestic violence (Fawcett, Heise, Isita-Espejel, & Pick, 1999). Both studies identified women's transgression of traditional gender roles, alcohol use, and social/economic pressures as an antecedent of domestic violence. Strategies to cope with violence included running or hiding, patience, and endurance. Women identified other women or mothers as sources of support and indicated legal recourse was seldom sought.

The prevalence of child abuse in Mexico is not as well documented. Until the late 1970s, child abuse was not considered a social problem in Mexico. As recently as 1992, Article 423 in the Civil Law included the provision that parents and guardians had the right to punish their children in moderation, modified later to state, "the right to correct without abuse" (Estrada, 2001). Statistics on the prevalence of child abuse in Mexico are few. No national database exists, and reporting is not mandatory, although it is encouraged (Estrada, 2001; Frias-Armenta & Sales, 1997). Survey data from Mexico City, from a survey done by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* in 1999, indicated that about 18% of children 17 and younger live in families where there is violence. The same survey indicated that more than 28% of those (adults) completing the survey had suffered abuse as children (Knaul & Angel Ramirez, 2005).

Further information about child abuse can be gleaned from research about child punishment in Mexico. A study by Félix-Lopez and Meléndez-Aviña (as cited in Frias-Armenta, 2002) reported 97% of adult participants, in a study conducted in Veracruz, stated they had been hit as children. One half of these respondents indicated they had been hit daily. Research indicates that long-term effects of child punishment on women include depression/anxiety, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and punitive behavior toward their own children (Frias-Armenta, 2002).

Studies conducted in Mexico link violence within a woman's family of origin with partner violence later in life. Alvarado-Zaldivar and colleagues (1998) found physical violence against the mother to be an antecedent of emotional violence in the daughter's adult life. Studies also described the experience of childhood abuse/violence as a risk factor for partner violence later in life (Castro et al., 2003; Castro & Ruiz, 2004; Diaz-Olavarrieta, Paz, de la Cadena, & Campbell, 2001; Rivera-Rivera et al., 2004).

Qualitative studies from Mexico about the experience of violence and abuse in childhood are missing from the literature. In order to better understand how this experience influences women's lives, research is needed to explore and describe women's perceptions of the experience. This study is an effort to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study lie in theories of narrative psychology, narrative analysis, and girls' development. According to Murray (2003), "Narrative psychology is concerned with the structure, content, and function of the stories that we tell each other and ourselves in social interaction" (p. 95). We form our view of the world and of self through narrative and in turn world and self are shaped for us through narrative. It has been argued that the creation of narrative or storytelling is a way in which individuals make sense of the world and find meaning in what has happened (Bailey & Tilley, 2002; Murray, 2003; Tappan & Brown, 1989). This study explores the narratives constructed by young women about growing up in a family where there is violence and abuse.

The reading of the narratives is influenced by the theory of women's psychology and girls' development put forth by Brown and Gilligan (1992), specifically the constructs of resistance and self-silencing. Resistance refers to the struggle against abusive relationships, the quest for relationships where one can freely disagree, experience feelings, and voice one's emotions. Self-silencing occurs when resistance threatens relationships or is met with reprisals (Gilligan, 2004). The purpose of this study is to utilize narrative technique to bring the voices and perspectives of women who have either experienced or witnessed violence and abuse in their family of origin into the literature and to explore how women process these life events through the construction of narrative.

Methodology

This exploratory descriptive study employed episodic narrative interviews (Murray, 2003). A convenience sample of young women who were preparing to graduate from a large parochial girls' residential school in central Mexico was recruited for this research. The students chosen to

attend this school must meet two criteria: They must pass a written examination and come from a family situated within the lowest socioeconomic strata of the society. The girls chosen for this school are from many regions of Mexico. They pay no tuition and are provided with an educational opportunity that otherwise would be beyond their reach. At the school students experience 5 years of academic education, life skills training, opportunities to learn music and dance, physical fitness activities, and sports including instruction in Tai Kwan Do. Students live in family groups and participate in vegetable gardening, sewing, and spiritual activities such as daily prayer and Mass twice a week. Students age 18 and older were invited to participate in a study about families by verbal announcement following Sunday Mass (data collected in 2004). Experiences of violence/abuse were not used as inclusion criteria to be interviewed. A convenience sample of 24 was drawn from the population of students who volunteered to participate.

Informed consent was obtained. Participants were given a written description of the study, stating in part,

The purpose of the study is to help health care providers understand what young women learn from their families about relationships. I understand that the information I provide may be used in written articles to help health care providers learn how to assist girls and women from the Mexican culture. (Written consent form)

Participants chose a name to use for the interviews. The interviews were tape recorded, and field notes were written afterward. In order to encourage narrative and allow the participant flexibility in her response, each interview began with the prompt, "Describe yourself to me." The next prompt was, "Tell me about your family." Further prompts were not scripted. Verbal prompts such as "*algo más*", ("anything more") "*Okay*", and paraphrasing her response were used to obtain more detail in a story. If a participant had not discussed relationships, she was asked to tell what she has learned in her family about relationships between men and women. Participants were not asked to disclose violence in their families. Stories of violence arose spontaneously, usually after the prompt, "*Dime sobre tu familia*" ("Tell me about your family").

The collection of stories occurred during recreational time on Saturdays when the campus is alive with the laughter and activity of girls. During this time, girls were tending to the many flower beds and gardens, doing needlework in the shade of trees, and some were cleaning living areas or washing tennis shoes. Although gardening and cleaning might not typically be seen as recreational, the spirit and liveliness of the girls indicated this was indeed a relaxing and fun time for them. Interviews took place in the library, a large second-floor room with windows opening out onto the campus. Interviews occurred in pairs.

I am an Anglo woman, a U.S. citizen, and a nurse. I was residing at the school, along with two other nurses from the United States, for 5 weeks teaching a small group of students and Sisters to be health educators within the school. I have basic Spanish conversation skills. To facilitate the interviews however, they were conducted with the assistance of a bilingual teacher who helped clarify complex points and provided brief summaries when needed. The woman teaches English at the school, is a few years older than the participants, and graduated from a sister school in another country. It was evident the students respected her and she them; they had a natural, easy rapport. None of the participants were students in the health education class.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Spanish. The narratives were read in Spanish and stories within each narrative were identified. Each story was translated into English by the researcher (I am literate in Spanish, but not bicultural). A bilingual bicultural research assistant (the coauthor of this article) verified the translations and clarified areas that were difficult to translate. In analyzing the data, narratives were kept whole; the units of analysis were the discreet stories within each narrative. Each story was read, and a note was written regarding the content and function of the story. Categorical content analysis proceeded across narratives to determine common content, themes, and functions (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

Findings

Twenty-four women were interviewed. All participants were 18 years old, had entered the school at age 13 or 14, had resided there for 5 years, and were preparing to graduate. Most (19) described themselves as being from rural areas or small villages; the others described their homes as urban. The sizes of their families ranged from 1 to 12 children, with 22 participants describing families of 6 or more children. More than half (15) described parents as living together, 6 said their parents were separated, and 3 had one parent who was deceased. Participants were from 7 different Mexican states.

All of the women interviewed discussed issues of family life. Five of the interviews described families of mutual support where love was openly communicated:

I like to share a lot with my family, my sadness, my feelings, more with my mother. I like my brothers, in spite of the fact that they are men. They like to support my mother. Because there are no other women in the house, they help my mother with the housework. (Mayrani)

My family is. ... I like to spend time with them because, I don't know, through the passing of time, we receive the support of our parents, of my father and mother, because always they have supported us in our decisions, always they have encouraged us. My sisters, my mother encourages them to continue studying to be

something in life. (Erika)

My mother is a very good person. She always gives us advice so that we don't make mistakes in life. And she tells us some mistakes that she made when she was small, so that we don't make them. My father also works in the field (*campo*). Also he is a hard-working man. He also tells us the mistakes he made. He doesn't want us to repeat them. And the two, they get along well (parents). (Esmeray)

These five narratives described mothers and fathers supporting children and each other. The participants described their mothers with admiration, some saying clearly they would like to be as caring and thoughtful as their mothers. Although these families come from *recursos bajos* (low economic resources), home life was described as peaceful and nurturing.

Nineteen of the 24 narratives can be described as arising from families where violence or abuse occurred. Narratives coded as containing violence and abuse included those in which the narrator was physically or sexually abused as well as those in which the narrator witnessed physical/sexual violence against mothers or other family members. This article presents a detailed analysis of the 19 narratives containing stories of violence and abuse.

Narratives of Violence and Abuse

The women interviewed for this study had lived apart from their families, except for two vacation periods totaling about 3 weeks per year, for the past 5 years. Therefore, the narratives relayed were constructed at some distance from the experience of living with their families. Life at home was described as unpredictable, chaotic, and at times dangerous. References to parental support were rare. When support was discussed, the supportive parent was described in contrast to an abusive parent or parent figure.

The narratives were constructed around two unique experiences, that of witnessing violence/abuse of a family member and being the victim of violence/abuse. Narratives were coded as either witness or victim. The narratives within each of the two categories (witness and victim) were distinctly different in content and function. Content refers to the specifics of the story (what happened and to whom) as well as the message the narrator is conveying through the story. The function refers to the purpose the telling of the story fulfills for the narrator.

Witness Narratives

Content

The narratives in this category were primarily descriptions of violence against mothers perpetrated by fathers or a father figure; some included abuse of a sibling by the abusive parent. Women talked about seeing their mothers hit by their fathers. Hitting and occasionally throwing things were the only forms of physical violence described. There were no references to kicking,

choking, or use of weapons against the mothers:

My Papa hit her a lot, because everything bothered him. If there was no food, he was angry. Everything, everything bothered him and he began to throw things in my house. My sisters and brothers, when they were small—the older ones, saw how my father hit my mother and, well, they tried to defend her or to do what they could, but they couldn't do it because they were small. (Elena)

My father returned and hit my mother a lot. One time he hit her in the eye, and left it black and blue. [...] And, well, my mother said the doctor told her she would lose her eye because the blow had left it so bruised. (Kenia)

With the passing of time my father began to drink, to drink, and, well, to drink. And from there, well, soon he hit my mother. Later my mother thought that he would change, but, no, it was not to be that way. (Yara)

Hitting often was described as occurring with drinking. Violence was never described as a one-time or infrequent event, but as something that happened with regularity. The most consistent theme in these narratives was the children's efforts to protect their mothers.

As in the case of Elena, in the above quote, the children's strategies to protect their mother were not described as successful:

Well, when I was in my home I suffered a lot because my parents always were fighting. And my mother, especially, suffered. Me, although I was small, I suffered from the time I was very small. My father always hit my mother. And I told him not to hit her. I tried to help my mother, but I couldn't. [...] And I cried a lot, and said to my mother that it didn't matter, that although I didn't have the support of my father, I would overcome. (Izquel)

Despite the inability to protect mothers in the past, continuing efforts toward protection often were described. Some hoped to be able to take the mother out of her situation: "What I must do is take my mother from that place because of the way he (father) looks at her. ... He humiliates her" (Mirian). Most students also described plans to help in other ways upon graduation. Typically, they envisioned financial support for mothers and siblings.

Functions

The telling of the narratives performed two functions for the narrators: to articulate strategies to avoid entering an abusive relationship and to voice resistance to societal norms that work to perpetuate violence against women.

Strategies

Women acknowledged that all relationships have problems and identified the precursors or contributors to these problems. The following exemplars illustrate situations the participants

viewed as contributing to poor relationships:

I don't want to live in the same situation as my sisters. Already they have suffered a lot with their husbands and their children, since they were married very young. (Mirian)

Most of my aunts had children before marriage—because they have a low level of education and are not very aware of what they are going to do. They think their way out is to go with a boy—I believe that is what happens with many women. In my pueblo there is no work. Generally they stay at home and their husbands or boyfriends go to the U.S. or to some other place to look for work. And, well, they are left there waiting to see when their husband or boyfriend will return and she will get out of her house.

They have children before they have reached adulthood, and they think it is easy. When they have them (children) it begins to complicate their life. Sometimes they want to separate, but they can't because when a woman has a child, it is not the same as when a man has a child—because she won't be accepted by other men. This is what happened with my aunt. (Esperanza)

There are those who have firm goals and wait until 20, 23 years and at times they marry well the first time and then have children. But others marry first at 13, 14, or 15, and they may not marry but have children at that age. They have a boyfriend. Well, he does not respond to the child, and, well, she is a single mother. She does not learn from this experience, but returns to make the same mistake and has another child with another man who is also not responsible—and there they go. Sometimes there might be 8 different fathers without a marriage. The children suffer the decisions of the mother—and receive physical and psychological attacks because they do not have the love of a father or mother. (Mari)

Several women identified adolescent marriage, having children before marriage, and not learning from experience as contributing to poor relationships. They did not see the serious difficulties that their mothers, aunts, and sisters experienced as prescriptive for their own future relationships. Having identified what they see as problems, or what they perceive as contributing to the poor relationship, the women articulated strategies to avoid this in their own relationships. The most straightforward advice given for avoiding a poor marriage is to delay the age at which one marries:

I won't marry until I'm 28. ... I would like to have a good marriage. ... I consider this decision very important, something that will affect my whole life. ... I want to have a marriage that is planned beforehand and a vision of the future. ... In spite of my situation, economic or family or social, if one has the intention and it is what one wants and fights for it, it is possible to achieve a good marriage. (Mari)

Planning and communication were also frequently mentioned as contributing to a good marriage:

Marriages that go well must have good communication and be planned, because there are those that let themselves be impulsive and marry. They live with constant quarreling. (Mari)

I think also it is necessary to know the person. Usually the persons that date first are simply friends, a normal friendship. And during the friendship, I think that also we begin to know the certain qualities the person has. And I think also that in order to know him well we have to talk with him about what he likes to do or to ask certain questions to see if he has the characteristics that we, as women, want in our partner.

Interviewer: What type of characteristics?

Well, that he is responsible, that always he has a firm goal, that he likes to be calm, that he is not a person who is provocative—will make problems. I feel that it is necessary to always plan a relationship before you have it because always it is always necessary to know each other so there won't be problems. It is necessary to know what one likes and doesn't like. If we share ideas, we avoid problems. (Rocío)

The women held the beliefs that planning, considering alternatives, and getting to know the person before marriage can provide some level of assurance that a relationship will be good. Women specifically identified mothers as the source of the lessons that instill these beliefs:

In the village, there many girls ages 12 and 13 that are already married, and, well, that isn't what I wanted. [...] Actually, my mother said to us, "Daughters," she gave us advice more than anything, she said, "No, daughters, pay attention to whom you are going to marry. Not with the first one you meet and leave with him already. He just bothers you and that, but later he is going to leave. They have a baby and already they (man) leave." (Gimena)

Parents also were identified as being at fault when daughters' actions were not in accordance with these beliefs:

At times the parents don't call attention or orient them (daughters) well, sometimes the daughters go off course. They are not going down a solid path, they are caught and they go to the disco and other places and they are left pregnant or suffer physical abuse by other men that want whatever woman. ... their life is broken, many are stuck there and are not able to get out. They think their life has ended. (Esperanza)

I want to get married, but if I am going to do it, I want to do it well. ... It is what I have observed in all of society, that the problem affects all of society. Because, really, if the family thinks well and acts well, then the society also is going to be that way. Because the family is the most important unit in society. If they follow the plans and all, then the family members are going to have relationships with others, they are not going to have so much aggression, conflicts, wars, I don't know. We are able to change much through the family. (Esperanza)

The experience of witnessing violence at home did not discourage women from wanting to form families. The desire to create a different life for themselves and for their families prompted the development of plans for delayed marriage, delayed childbearing, and healthier relationships.

Resistance

The second function of the narratives from witnesses was to voice resistance to societal norms such as male domination and male-to-female violence:

I have learned that, although the men always believe they are the greatest in the home, also the women, we have a position of leadership—that is to take our family forward. There are many families that always live in submission to a man or father of the house. In that way they are afraid. They (men) always want to fix everything by hitting. They always think their ideas are the best, and they don't realize that it hurts the other person.

In my family, for example, my brother, with my sister-in-law, has a relationship that is not very good. He always tries to hit her, to make her feel less (belittle), to make her feel something that she does not deserve. He should not make her feel bad because she also has feelings and (she) is also a human being.

I think that we must always reflect and try to change, because the men do not have the right to manipulate the women like they want. But the women must also be strong and face them in order that they realize that we also are worthy, maybe more than them. (Rocío)

I have noticed in most relationships the man always dominates and is the one who makes the decisions. [...] I don't think it is good when (the woman) accepts what is happening, when really inside she is not accepting. Little by little the relationship is breaking. (Esperanza)

Rocío spoke in a clear voice of resistance. She acknowledged that hitting of women by men and male privilege are commonplace in her experience. However, she identified relationships in which this happens as not very good. She advised women to be strong, not be manipulated by men. Similarly, Esperanza identified silencing oneself as not good for the woman or the relationship.

Survivor Narratives

Content

The narratives of childhood physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by family members were much longer, contained a greater number of stories per narrative, and included more detail. Two subcategories of narrative emerged from this group, physical abuse (nonsexual) and sexual abuse.

Physical Abuse (Nonsexual)

Nonsexual physical violence often was described as punishment. This punishment involved being hit with electrical cords, *mecates* (rope made from the maguey plant that causes the skin to burn), and sticks. One woman said her father pulled on her sister's ear so hard it caused her to become deaf. The narrators made sense of physical punishment in two ways: as the way parents enforced desired or correct behavior and as the result of the adult having had the same experience in his or her youth. The following are examples from the narratives:

Well, the relationship that I have with my parents before is not so ... was not so good because my father demanded with beatings.

Researcher: Demanded with beatings?

He beat me a lot because he believes, or believed, that this is the way one would be able to understand, although really it was not that way. Well, because I felt and I knew what he wanted from me, but he never had good communication with me, [...] What he wanted was not to lose me, in the way of other young women that ... well ... that marry at a young age or have children and don't achieve more than what is due. (Chalia)

When he (father) is going to hit us, he (grandfather) tells him no. That we were too big (old) for him to be hitting us. He doesn't hit us like before, because before, yes, he hit us, when we came home late from school or went out with our friends. He asked us where we were and we told him we had been for a walk, and, well, he scolded us or hit us. (Yaris)

Chalía understands the beating as her father's way of enforcing what he believes is best for her—that she not marry young. She acknowledges that although this is his way, it is not really the way one ought to communicate this intention. Yaris also described hitting as punishment for unacceptable behavior.

In the following example Mari explains her mother's violence in a similar way, adding the dimension of her mother's earlier life experience:

My mother always hit us with the cord of the iron. She always said that she was going to draw blood from our mouths. ... At times she would say that we were not her children. I believe it is because she suffered very much when she was young. She is very tough and I know that it is for a good reason, but maybe there are other ways. [...] The biggest problems in my family are with religion (reference to earlier story) and the hitting when we make mistakes. (Mari)

Mari understands physical punishment as her mother's response to the suffering in her life as well as her mother's way of correcting her children's behavior. Like Chalía, Mari acknowledges that there are other ways to influence a child's behavior.

Sexual Abuse

Five of the 19 women described specific incidents of sexual abuse occurring during their childhood. Perpetrators included an uncle, stepfather, brothers-in-law, and an acquaintance. The eventual response to this was to keep silent about it. Some women did not tell anyone what had happened. Those who told a mother or other trusted person about the abuse were met with disbelief or physical punishment:

He (stepfather) tried to abuse me. And I didn't know what to do (crying) because I didn't want to tell anything to my mother because I was afraid. There they told me that I seduced him or something like that. No one in my family knows.

Interviewer: No one knows?

(crying a lot) No, no one. And I haven't told my mother anything. And he later would get into to bed with me. I would get out. I would get out of the way on the bed at his side. But, later, he began to touch me when I was sleeping. And I just would get up from the bed. I never told my mother. (María)

When I lived with my oldest sister, the brother of her husband, at times entered, as I slept there with my nephew, he entered and at times in that way he touched my nephews and everything. Although I clearly told these things to my family, they never listened to me. They said, "Ay, you are very young, you don't know." (Anilu)

One time—it was like in July because the milpa (corn plants) was very tall and it was green—I went to give food to the chicks that were in the milpa, and then my uncle saw me. (He) frightened me because always he looked for me like that. [...] I wasn't able to talk because I was so afraid. And he grabbed me. He grabbed my hands and threw me onto a mountain of trash that was there and I wasn't able to do anything. I was left paralyzed and not able to scream and not even able to cry.

Then he unbuckled his pants, and, well, I realized. Then I thought he would do something to me, something bad and ...I was praying, that way, inside of me. And then my mother opened the door and he heard, he heard when it opened. And, well, he began to run. And, well, he got off me, but I began crying. And, well, my mother, we didn't have much of a relationship, we didn't talk much. Then, well, she yelled at me. And I was crying, and she told me ... and I was afraid because before I had told her what happened and she didn't pay any attention to me. I told her nothing happened. She said to me, "Then why are you crying?" and, well, I was not able to tell her. And she said to me, "Well, so that you stop crying!" and she hit me. (Stephanie)

Silence became a self-protective response to sexual abuse. Girls learned that revealing what had happened usually meant further pain: the pain of not being believed, the pain of being blamed for the abuse, and at times the pain of physical punishment. In the course of the interview where sexual abuse was disclosed, I would ask whether she talked about this with others. All women responded that they did not speak of these events outside of the safety of the school:

There, outside, I haven't talked with anyone about this. It was here when I poured it out to my classmates, because I offered them my trust and they offered me their trust. I felt very sad and discouraged and they realized it was because I had this in my mind. But I didn't tell my mother anything or my sister, or my own father. I didn't tell them anything. It was when I was here they (friends in school) told me to talk to them. And I talked with them; I told them what happened in my life. And it was here when I told what had happened to me. (María)

Others also indicated they talked with classmates about what had happened. Those who did stated that classmates sometimes shared similar experiences and that all were supportive, offering words of encouragement.

Functions

Two functions were identified in the survivor stories, *desahogarse* and explaining/justifying what happened. The word *desahogarse* derives from the word *ahogarse* (to drown/suffocate) and means literally to undrown oneself. The translation for *desahogarse* is to confess, or get something off one's chest (Harper Collins Spanish Concise Dictionary, 2000). Mexican women use this term to describe a process of unburdening, pouring out their troubles. *Desahogarse* was evident in narratives of sexual abuse and in some of the nonsexual physical abuse narratives. In the narratives of sexual abuse this function is an interesting contrast to the content element "silence."

Each of the narratives of nonsexual physical abuse functioned as a psychological defense by explaining/justifying the actions of the parent or adult. Narrators interpreted the physical violence in such a way as to preserve a positive image of the perpetrator, by explaining that parents were acting out in response to their own suffering, or justified physical punishment as parental way of enforcing good behavior. The narratives of sexual abuse did not function as a psychological defense for the narrator. Narrators who had been sexually abused offered no explanation or justification for what had happened.

Discussion

In response to two very broad prompts to tell about themselves and then their families, women's narratives were easily categorized as those who did not describe violence or abuse in their lives, those who had witnessed violence or abuse within their families (but did not describe physical or sexual abuse directed at them), and those who described being victims of physical or sexual abuse. Twenty-four women were interviewed. This paper presents the findings from the analysis of the 19 narratives from participants who witnessed or experienced violence or abuse. The decision to focus on this group of narratives was made with careful consideration, after many

hours spent reading and analyzing the texts. The resistance and silences in the narratives clearly filled a gap in the knowledge about women's experiences. The decision was based on a desire to highlight the resistance in the young women's voices and to give voice to those who had been silent, yet chose to share their stories for the purpose of helping others to understand. The number of participants who described violence is greater than would be expected. Although all the participants were poor, the descriptions of the families where violence occurred also included stressors other than poverty, such as relocation, death or divorce of parents, alcoholism, and difficult relationships with extended family members. Possibly those who volunteered were disproportionately from homes where violence occurred because they needed someone to bear witness to their story.

In considering how the narratives were constructed it is important to note that these narratives were constructed in the safe nurturing surroundings of the residential school setting. Many of the women expressed gratitude to the order of nuns who are in charge of the school. All described their experiences at the school in very positive ways, many using the phrase, "*Vale la pena*" ("it's worth the cost, [to be here]"). The cost, as they explained, was being distant from family and home.

The narratives in the two categories (witness narratives and survivor narratives) differed in content and function. The narratives of those who had witnessed violence or abuse tended to be shorter than the narratives from victims of physical or sexual abuse. They included strategies to prevent marrying an abusive partner and clear statements of resistance against the subjugation and abuse of women. These narrators explained what they saw as the precursors of bad relationships and created strategies to protect themselves from such a relationship. Specific strategies mentioned include not having children before marriage, delaying marriage, and getting an education. These findings are consistent with research that indicates both age and education are inversely proportional to violence against a woman by her male partner (Castro et al., 2003; Rivera-Rivera et al., 2004). Rivera-Rivera also found an inverse relationship between age at first sexual intercourse and violence. None of the narrators in this group spoke of silencing themselves about what they had witnessed.

The narratives from women who had been victims of physical but not sexual violence all functioned to help the narrator make meaning of the experience. Either she viewed harsh punishment as a means parents used to enforce correct behavior or as resulting from the parent's own experience of harsh treatment. These narratives also included phrases of resistance where the narrator spoke out against the use of harsh physical punishment of children. Depression,

anxiety, substance abuse, and intergenerational transmission of violence have been identified as long-term effects of physical punishment on Mexican daughters (Frias-Armenta, 2002). Many of the women described these sequelae in their narratives. Identification of and resistance voiced toward this type of punishment is an indication that these women may not pass on this mode of correction and its attendant sequelae to their children.

The 5 women who described experiencing sexual violence did not include in their narratives attempts to explain or justify the behavior of the perpetrator. None of the narratives could be interpreted as an effort to make meaning of or make sense of the experience. These narratives all included references to the silencing effect the experience had on them. Some said they did not tell anyone what had happened until they came to the school. Others described disclosing what had happened and having the disclosure met with disbelief and denial or physical punishment, resulting in lack of further disclosure and discussion about the abuse. This is consistent with Gilligan's (2004) assertion that when girls speak the truth about what has happened and it is met with threats or actual reprisals, what they know to be true goes "underground." They dissociate from the truth. As described by Gilligan, when a girl in this situation honestly says what she is thinking and feeling, she jeopardizes her relationships. She must choose between having a voice and having a relationship. In order to stay in connection, in these cases with an important family member, the girl often chooses silence. All of the narratives of sexual violence included some degree of self-silencing about the incident, with very little voice of resistance.

Implications for Practice and Research

The provision of culturally appropriate care is dependent on understanding the complexities of women's lives. The findings of this study provide insights into how a group of Mexican women, from various areas in Mexico, describe their family life. They pose suggestions for intervention and interesting questions for further inquiry.

The findings contradict the notion that women who experience violence at home will expect it in future relationships. These young women have been supported within the environment of the school to develop their full potential intellectually, physically, and spiritually. This suggests that working within school systems to provide a holistic approach to education may be healing and assist young women to develop strategies for identifying mutually satisfying relationships.

All the women resided within the protective environment of the school. Yet, unlike those

who had witnessed abuse or who experienced nonsexual physical violence, those who had experienced sexual abuse at home did not speak words of resistance and did not describe strategies to protect themselves in the future. This may place them at greater risk for psychological difficulties and identification by a future abuser as someone who can be subjugated to his wishes. These findings suggest that young women who have experienced sexual abuse may benefit from greater support in the form of opportunity for *desahogarse*, pouring out their story in a safe space. Once the unburdening process has begun, the development of resistance strategies can be facilitated. Further, these findings underscore the importance of assessing all women for a history of abuse.

Questions for further inquiry include the following: What are the similarities and differences in the narratives of women who have had the advantage of education in a safe, supportive environment and those who have not? What specifically contributes to the strong sense of self, voice of resistance, and protective strategies described in these narratives?

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