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AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LEAVING ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Dena Hassouneh-Phillips

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AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LEAVING ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Dena Hassouneh-Phillips, PhD
Oregon Health Sciences University, School of Nursing, Portland, Oregon, USA

American Muslim women are a growing population whose experiences of abuse remain largely unstudied. To begin to amend this gap in knowledge, this article examines American Muslim women's experiences of leaving abusive partners as reported in a larger narrative study. The process of leaving as described by participants includes four stages: *reaching the point of saturation*, *getting khula* (an Islamic divorce initiated by wives), *facing family and/or community disapproval*, and *reclaiming the self*. Each of these stages illustrates the significance of group-oriented cultural values in shaping participants' experiences of leaving their abusers. I compare study findings with existing literature and conclude by offering suggestions for research and practice in this area.

Intimate partner violence affects 4.4 million adult American women every year (Plichta, 1997). The Family Violence Prevention Fund has defined intimate partner abuse as a pattern of assault and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks and economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners (Warshaw, Ganley, & Salber, 1995). All forms of abuse occur across cultures (Levinson, 1989) and are associated with a host of serious health problems, including chronic pain syndromes, mental health disorders, and

death (Campbell & Flitecraft, 1998; Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Campbell, Soeken, McFarlane, & Parker, 1998; Dienemann et al., 2000; Stark & Filtcraft, 1995; Sutherland, Bybee, & Sullivan, 1998; Woods, 2000). Because batterers typically do not change without treatment, many abused women eventually leave their abusers to create safety in their lives. The decision to leave may be influenced by personal, economic, and cultural factors (Rose, Campbell, & Kub, 2000; Ulrich, 1991, 1998). Unfortunately, most researchers have focused on personal and economic factors, leaving cultural factors largely unexplored. The extremely limited information that is available about cultural factors, however, suggests that women belonging to group-oriented cultures that forbid or strongly disapprove of divorce may endure abuse that is prolonged and severe before leaving (Cohen & Savaya, 1997).

Recent investigations of divorce and abuse among Arab Muslim women underscore the significant influence of culture on a woman's decision to leave. Several studies have identified the tremendous social stigma associated with divorce in Arab and Muslim cultures as a significant barrier to ending battering relationships (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1998; Cohen & Savaya, 1997; Haj-Yahia, 2000). Although some researchers have investigated the divorce experiences of Arab Muslim women, they have not published studies to date exploring the same phenomenon among American Muslims. This is true despite the fact that American Muslims are a sizeable and rapidly growing minority group whose culture is poorly understood by the general population (Al-Shingiety, 1991; Haddad, 1991). To begin to amend this gap in knowledge, this paper examines abused American Muslim women's experience of divorce. The information highlighted is derived from a larger narrative study that was conducted examining the cultural context of abuse among American Muslims (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2000, in press; Phillips, 1999).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies of North American Women

This review highlights two sets of qualitative studies that specifically examine women's experiences of leaving abusive relationships in North America. Landenburger (1989) was among the first to describe women's leaving their abusers as a process. Landenburger (1989, 1993) identified and refined the elements of this process in two separate studies of women who had left or were leaving abusive relationships. According to Landenburger (1989, 1993), abusive relationships go through four phases: *binding*, *enduring*, *disengaging*, and *recovering*. The *disengaging* and *recovering* phases specifically address the terminal stage of abusive rela-

tionships. During the *disengaging* phase "the abuse has become representative of the relationship" and women struggle with conflicting feelings of loyalty to partners and allegiance to themselves (Landenburger, 1993, p. 381). Also during this stage, some women begin to feel as though they would be better off dead than remain in the relationship. The *recovering* phase consists of a period of readjustment after a woman has left her abuser. During the *recovering* phase, women begin to search for meaning and existentially to let go of their abusive relationships.

In a similar study (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999), using a feminist grounded theory design researchers examined the processes by which women living in small town, island, and rural environments leave and stay out of abusive relationships. The basic social psychological process for survivors described in the study was *reclaiming self*. Reclaiming self consists of four stages: *counteracting abuse*, *breaking free*, *not going back*, and *moving on*. *Counteracting abuse* is a process of resistance that begins with the onset of partner abuse wherein victims relinquish parts of themselves, minimize the violence, and then later begin to fortify their defenses. *Breaking free* occurs when women actively disengage from the abuser and from their joint assets and lifestyle. *Not going back* is a process of sustaining separation from abusers by establishing and protecting personal space. Finally, *moving on* is a process of facing the past and grappling with the future.

The work of Landenburger (1989, 1993) primarily focuses on internal change processes battered women experience as well as changes in a woman's relationship with her abuser. Although Landenburger (1993) notes that women's experiences of leaving are influenced by "the culture in which we live and the demands made on women through ascribed roles of behavior" (p. 378), her theory of leaving does not adequately address these important factors. Although Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) and Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) also primarily focus on internal change processes at the individual level in their study, they attend to cultural factors to a greater degree than Landenburger (1989, 1993) by considering the influence of rural culture. According to Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995), during the *counteracting abuse* phase, rural isolation and cultural values that emphasize independence and personal privacy contributed to participants' propensity to remain silent about and to blame themselves for abuse. Once participants had reached the *breaking free* stage, however, their abusive relationships became public knowledge and strong cultural attitudes against intimate partner abuse came into play.

Studies of Arab Women

In addition to the work that has been done in North America, Cohen and Savaya (1997) and Haj-Yahia (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) recently

have examined abuse and divorce among Palestinian populations. As previously noted there are no studies addressing the abuse experiences of American Muslim women published to date.

Cohen and Savaya (1997) conducted a qualitative exploratory study of divorced Muslim Arab women and of Arab professionals engaged in therapeutic work in Jaffa, Israel. The title of this work, " 'Broken Glass': The Divorced Woman in Moslem Arab Society in Israel," aptly captures the essence of the study. Participants in this study reported that others viewed them as permanently deficient and described themselves as social pariahs. Members of society referred to divorced women as "broken glass," from the Arabic saying, "Glass once broken can never again be made whole" (Cohen & Savaya, 1997, p. 236). Of all the causes for divorce cited by participants, prolonged and severe physical and sexual abuse was the most common.

In a second study, Savaya and Cohen (1998) combined qualitative and quantitative methods to identify reasons for divorce among Israeli Arab women. Consistent with their first study, Savaya and Cohen (1998) found that women divorced mainly in the wake of prolonged and severe violence, sexual torment, and emotional abuse. Of note, in addition to intimate partner violence, participants reported physical abuse perpetrated by a member of their husband's extended family as another common reason for divorce.

In another set of studies, Haj-Yahia (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) quantitatively examined attitudes toward wife beating among Palestinians both in Israel and in the occupied territories. These studies indicate that a substantial number of Arab men and women do not hold batterers responsible for their violent behavior, but instead place blame on victims. In his article, "Wife Abuse and Battering in the Sociocultural Context of Arab Society," Haj-Yahia (2000) notes that in the group-oriented cultures of Arabs, women are socialized to believe that the needs of their children and extended family members take precedence over their own well-being and personal safety. In particular, the article suggests that women in Arab societies are expected to uphold the reputation of their families:

> The daughter is expected to remain loyal to her family as well as to her husband, and to refrain from tarnishing the family's reputation, especially when the family fears that the community may justify the husband's violence against his wife and blame her mother for failing to educate her. (p. 240)

Given the tremendous stigma associated with divorce in Arab societies, upholding the family's reputation often is synonymous with staying with the abuser. The stigma of divorce is integrally related to cultural conceptions of the family as central to society, and of the individual as

subordinate to both family and society. Family unity and harmony are of paramount importance, and women who leave abusive partners may be socially ostracized and labeled "'loose,' 'rebellious,' 'disrespectful,' 'selfish,'" (Haj-Yahia, 2000, p. 240), and uncaring. These cultural realities have led both scholars and service providers to question the appropriateness of the use of individualistic Western models of intimate partner violence intervention in group-oriented societies (Haj-Yahia, 1995, 2000).

Summary

To summarize, researchers who have conducted studies in North America exploring the process of leaving abusive relationships primarily have focused on individual internal processes of change, whereas studies of battering conducted in the Middle East have emphasized the significance of society and culture on a woman's decision to leave. Although both sets of studies point to the complexity of the phenomenon, the latter set exemplifies the importance of cultural factors, underscoring the need for models of violence intervention that service providers can appropriately use with women from group-oriented cultures. Hopefully, this article, by increasing service providers' awareness and understanding of abused American Muslim women's experiences, will contribute to the development of culturally competent interventions with this population.

THE POPULATION

Description of American Muslims

Islam is believed to be the fastest growing religion in the United States today (Stone, 1991). Estimated to number 6 million in the United States, Muslims are projected to outgrow the Jewish population by the year 2010, becoming the second largest religious group after Christians in America (Power, 1998). Muslims in America are a diverse group, composed of first-generation immigrants and their descendants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Sub-Sahara, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. In addition, American-born Muslims include Anglo Americans and African Americans (Hermansen, 1991; Stone, 1991). African Americans make up the single largest group of American Muslims, at approximately 40% of the total population (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). Although Muslims share a common religious culture (Hermansen, 1991), the influence of ethnicity and locale make American Muslims a very heterogeneous group. These factors along with variations in interpretations of Islamic doctrine (for example, fundamentalist influences) have shaped the emergence of various subcultures. Thus, a woman's experience of leaving an abusive

relationship is likely to differ from one community to the next, with some communities placing women at greater risk than others. It is important to note that *Muslim cultures are not synonymous with Islam itself*. Rather than representing Islamic ideals, these *lived cultures*, like all other cultures, represent the actuality of Muslim community life in America.

Study Sample

Two groups of women were included as study participants: (1) American Muslim women who were self-identified as having experienced abuse in the past; and (2) American Muslim women who had not personally experienced abuse but were aware of the phenomenon within their communities through knowledge of the abuse experiences of American Muslim friends, family, or acquaintances. For the purposes of this study American Muslim women were defined as women who self-identified as Muslims and were citizens or permanent residents of the United States.

A total of 17 Muslim women between the ages of 20 to 59 participated in the study. All of the participants followed primarily *sunni* Islamic teachings (the orthodox branch of Islam followed by a large majority of Muslims). The study employed a Muslim community consultant to assist with recruitment and provide an external audit of the analysis. The consultant and the investigator, both Arab American Muslim women, worked together to contact participants, describe the study over the phone, and schedule interviews.

Sixteen of the women had been married between 1 and 5 times. Of the 16 participants who had been married, 11 had been through at least one divorce. There were 9 African Americans, 3 European Americans, 2 Arab Americans, 2 Afghani Americans, and 1 Indonesian woman in the study sample. Thirteen of the 16 married or formerly married women in the sample reported having experienced emotional abuse. Of those who were emotionally abused, 9 reported physical abuse, and 2 reported sexual abuse.

Methods

This study used an adaptation of interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), incorporating both life history and focused interviewing techniques. The study gave participants the option of participating in individual or group interviews, or both. Seven women participated exclusively in group interviews, 5 in a combination of group and individual interviews, and 5 exclusively in individual interviews. Three unstructured group interviews (with between 3 and 6 participants per group) and 17 unstructured individual interviews were completed.

Participants chose more individual than group interviews primarily because it was more convenient for them. Although there was more disclosure of personal experiences of abuse in individual interviews, group interviews provided access to important information about group perceptions of religious, cultural, and community patterns relevant to the problem of abuse. All participants were asked to tell their life stories beginning in early childhood, to describe the details of abuse experiences, and, finally, to reflect on the meaning of these abuse experiences using a story-telling conversational approach. The study included follow-up interviews to clarify gaps in explanation and refine emergent themes. Interviews continued until members of the research team agreed that the analysis revealed an adequacy of description. To ensure the safety and protection of participants, guidelines for the ethical and safe conduct of research with battered women (Nursing Research Consortium on Violence and Abuse, 1990) were stringently followed, and all participants signed consent forms approved by an institutional review board prior to study participation.

Analysis occurred concurrently with data collection and was refined using data from follow-up interviews. Analytic strategies employed included thematic analysis, exemplars, biographical comparisons, and paradigm cases (Benner, 1994). Thematic analysis was performed using an iterative process of developing and refining codes, and both open coding and line-by-line coding techniques were used. Exemplars were interpreted by looking at the entirety of the texts from which they came as well as through comparison with other exemplars within each thematic category. Throughout the analytic process biographical comparisons were used to frame lived experience narratives by contextualizing locale, identity, and personal history. Finally, paradigm cases were used as a perceptual strategy to aid in understanding how subthemes were inter-related with one another. Each of these analytic strategies was employed using NUD*IST a qualitative research data managment program as a tool (Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty. Ltd., 1997).

The credibility of the account was strengthened via the use of member checks, prolonged engagement, peer review, external audit, triangulation,[1] and rich thick description. It is important to note that although the findings reported in this article represent common themes found across various Muslim subcultures, they are not generalizeable to all American Muslim

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[1]Triangulation of data consisted of a comparison of Muslim women's narratives with narratives obtained from Muslim leaders from three different communities. I asked leaders to describe their leadership roles and the problem of intimate partner violence in their respective communities. The data were collected and analyzed following Benner's (1994) guidelines for interpretive phenomenology.

women. Consistent with the critical hermeneutic paradigm guiding this research and the qualitative methodology employed, the reader is asked to avoid generalizing and instead consider the transferability of study findings. Readers can discern the transferability of findings to their settings based on local knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Allah did not make anything lawful more abominable to Him than divorce" (Abu-Dawud, 1999). Many participants in this study cited this well-known saying, indicating that this belief is pervasive and common. Because marriage in Islam is a form of religious practice and, to a large degree, defines women's social status (Hassouneh-Phillips, in press), its dissolution has far-reaching implications not only for family life but also for women's social and spiritual worlds. Perhaps it is for these reasons that when participants decided to leave their abusers, it was only when they were on the verge of psychological, spiritual, and/or physical annihilation—a stage that one participant called the *point of saturation*.

Divorces initiated by wives were slightly more common in the sample than were those initiated by husbands. All but two of the women who decided to divorce felt the need to obtain not only a civil divorce (in cases where marriages were registered civilly), but also an Islamic divorce. *Getting khula* (an Islamic divorce initiated by wives) often was difficult because in lieu of an Islamic court, male leaders, many of whom were completely unsympathetic to victims, had taken on the role of granting *khula*. While in the process and in the aftermath of divorce, participants faced significant *family and/or community disapproval*. Over time, many participants became alienated from their communities, creating a tremendous sense of loss and precipitating spiritual crisis. As these crises evolved, however, the majority of participants experienced a spiritual reawakening that lead to *reclaiming the self*. Distanced to some degree from the power of group-oriented norms, women gradually became free thinkers, reinterpreting Islam in empowering ways. In the following sections, each of these themes, *reaching the point of saturation*, *getting khula*, *facing family and/or community disapproval*, and *reclaiming the self*, is described and its commensurability with existing knowledge considered.

Reaching the Point of Saturation

Muslims know that Allah hates divorce. For Muslim women whose purpose in life is to submit to the will of God, displeasing Allah is a painful, even scary, thing to consider. Unfortunately, family and com-

munity censure of women seeking divorce often compounded this fear among study participants. Participants believed that these factors significantly influence American Muslim women's decision making in abusive relationships:

> People are saying I cannot get divorced, regardless of what happens—he is beating me to a pulp, he is beating the child—but you know we cannot get divorced. Because what will the family say? What will the community say?

Aware of the tremendous social stigma associated with divorce, participants typically decided to leave their abusers only after having experienced severe psychological, spiritual, and/or physical abuse. When participants perceived that it was either leave or die—psychologically, spiritually, and/or physically—women had reached *the point of saturation*. The next exemplar provides a clear description of what it meant to *reach the point of saturation:*

> I think you get to that point—*the point of saturation*—where you have to make a choice between yourself and everything else. I think, really, most Muslim women wait until they get to that point where it is almost to the point of their existence. They are choosing between their very own life, not their happiness, because they have already decided they can live without happiness, they can live without peace, they can live without things they want. But when it gets to the point where she is saying, "If I do not change, I am going to die—either physically, or emotionally, or spiritually," then she changes. She waits until that point. Some women to me just get overwhelmed and just go crazy before that point. Or they manifest some kind of illness in their body. I really believe that I lost my uterus because of all this. And because I internalized it. And that is where it went. And it was to the point where I felt like, "Is it going to be me or is it going to be the society and the family, and then mosque and everything else?" Most women wait until they get to that point.

As these exemplars demonstrate, weighing religion, family, and community against continued abuse and survival is not a simple and straightforward equation. Ultimately, for most participants, the realization that staying married would lead to their spiritual, psychological, and/or physical death was a necessary prerequisite to their decision to leave. *Reaching the point of saturation*, for this sample, has some similarities to Landenburger's (1989, 1993) description of the disengaging stage where women perceive that they would be better off dead than in their relationships. Because of the group-oriented nature of their experiences, however, participant's decision making before *reaching the point of saturation* more closely resembled the experiences of Arab Muslim women as reported by

both Cohen and Savaya (1997) and Haj-Yahia (2000). In both Arab and American Muslim women samples, the social consequences associated with divorce inhibited women from leaving their abusers for prolonged periods of time. Thus, it appears that while the internal processes of endurance and change may be similar across all samples, women's reasons for staying/postponing leaving in the Arab and American Muslim samples were much more group-oriented.

Getting *Khula*

Divorce, when initiated by a woman, is called *khula*. Khula requires a judicial decree issued by an Islamic court. The majority of participants believed they had to obtain *khula* in order to be free. As previously noted, this presented a problem for participants because there are no Islamic courts in the United States to petition. Instead, participants relied on individual Muslim leaders and scholars who, unfortunately, often were acquainted with their abusers personally. As the following two exemplars demonstrate, participants often had difficulties obtaining *khula:*

> My husband had said if you take the restraining order off I will give you a divorce, okay, *khula*. I went and took the restraining order off and I went to the *hakam*, the person who was representing me, and I said "Alhamdulilah" (praise be to God). Then he tells people, "I did not tell her I would give her a divorce." And he swore that. What could I do?... The brothers were not supporting me even though I had in my [marriage] contract [that] if he does so and so and if I request a divorce, they have to give it to me. They did not give it to me [the divorce] though.

> *Participant:* She said she got divorced through the mosque. She talked to the *Imam* [Muslim religious leader] and her husband was denying that he did anything. But in the past he had abused her and she would move away somewhere and then he would send her letters and say, "Forgive me," and things when she talked to the *Imam*. The husband said, "No, I was not abusing her. I have never done that." And she said, "I have the letters. I kept all the letters." She told the *Imam* that I have proof. I have his handwriting. Have him write something. And then that is how the *Imam* knew she was telling the truth. He said, "No, she is telling the truth, so I have to do this divorce."

> *Interviewer:* So if she did not have the letters, if she had not saved them?

> *Participant:* Then the *Imam* would not have divorced her.

> *Interviewer:* He would not believe her then?

> *Participant:* No.

Interviewer: And she would have to stay married?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: So she probably would not have just gone and gotten divorced in the American courts?

Participant: No. She wanted an Islamic divorce.

In the next exemplar, the *Imam* of this community did grant *khula;* however, he did so only after pressuring her to stay with an emotionally abusive husband. This pressure was applied by using her spirituality as a weapon against her:

> I spoke with the *Imam*. I told him I wanted a divorce. And he wanted to make sure that all options had been exhausted before he dissolved the marriage. When I told him yes, that this thing was over, there was no possibility of reconciliation. Even then he still said, "Why don't you stay? This could be your way to *Jenna* [heaven]."

Having difficulty getting *khula* is a barrier to leaving that appears to be unique to American Muslim women. To my knowledge, neither Arab Muslim nor non-Muslim North American women face this challenge. One of the tremendous disadvantages to getting *khula* for participants was that it extended the window of time during which they were estranged but not yet divorced from their husbands. This finding is troublesome given the increased risk of femicide that has been documented during the process of leaving abusive relationships (Campbell et al., 1998).

Several women reported serious harassment during the process of getting *khula:*

> He harassed everybody around me. My sister was getting phone calls, my parents. He was, like, showing up at work. One time he left this note with the secretary, this big long, convoluted letter. It said, "Come back to me, baby, our love is like a burning flame for Allah. If you do not come back, I will kill you and the baby." And I was going, "Oh my God." And shortly after that he blew up my friend's car—the people who had taken me in. He blamed them for everything.

Examples of harassment reported by participants included threats to take away children and spreading false rumors about participants' sexual behavior. Unfortunately, rumors and false accusations about women's sexual behavior were a significant threat to participants' ability to garner support from family and community:

> My mother is saying things. She thinks that I found someone. She thinks the reason why I divorced my husband is because I was getting married to somebody else. And so she calls me a slut.

As this exemplar demonstrates, rumors about women's sexual behavior were powerful enough to destroy even the closest of family relationships. Consistent with what Haj-Yahia (2000) reported about Arab women, several participants in this study cited slander (that is, being labeled "loose") as a significant factor in shaping family and community responses to abuse.

In all cases, harassment directed toward participants represented an escalation of abuse intended to force them to succumb to the demands of their abusers. These attempts to maintain coercive control over victims are consistent with other reports of harassment in the literature (Sheridan, 1998), indicating that the dynamic of power and control integral to harassment may be a cross-cultural phenomenon. The difference between Muslim women and non-Muslim North American women, then, appears not to lie in the dynamic of power and control itself, but rather in the weapons abusers have at their disposal to coerce victims. In a group-oriented culture, the disapproval of family, friends, and peers is an extremely powerful weapon that abusers can effectively wield against victims.

Facing Family and Community Disapproval

As they moved toward to *the point of saturation* participants' anticipation of family and community disapproval shaped their decision making. The following exemplars describe the ways that family and community voiced their disapproval of participants' leaving and highlight the extremely limited availability of social support for victims during this difficult process.

The first exemplar below comes from a group interview. These two participants had faced disapproval both during and after divorce:

Participant 1: One person said, "How could you leave that big house?" That is what people said to me. "How could you leave that big house?" It was like if I had a house like that I would have to put up with it.

Participant 2: That is what they told me: "You have a roof over your head, you have food in the house, how can you even complain? *Haram* (forbidden), *astaghfallah* (God forgive). How can you complain you have everything? You know that *Allah is not pleased with you....* You are giving up your *jenna* [heaven] if you divorce this man."

This next exemplar comes from a woman who had entered a marriage arranged by community members. This marriage was abusive from the start and she left following an episode of escalating abuse. Despite the fact that this woman had known members of her community for many

years and her abuser was a newcomer, the community's support went to her abuser: "After I left him and filed for divorce a lot of community members were saying that I was wrong to do that, that he was a wonderful person, and this and that."

Although support for participants who sought divorce was lacking and community disapproval often evident, when support was present it came from other Muslim women. Having gone through a divorce herself, this woman was able to provide support to one of her peers:

I talked to a woman who was married to a Saudi who was very abusive to her and gave her lots of diseases and slept with lots of people and expected her to obey regardless of what he did. And the whole thing of blaming the victim, he would say, "It is your fault that I have to sleep with other women," and so now he has gone and married somebody else. And she told me, "You are the first Muslim I have spoken to that has been supportive of the fact that I want to divorce my husband." Even though all these things go down she still does not get any support.

In addition to experiencing disapproval and receiving very limited social support, participants found that after divorce they no longer fit into the social structure of their communities. No longer under the protection of their fathers or their former husbands or both, divorced women had no place:

When it comes down to it, a divorced woman in Islam is nonexistent. In fact, I had a sister tell me that. She said, "Well, a single woman in Islam is an anomaly." And I said, "What do you mean by that?" She said, "Well, you are either under the protection of your husband or your father." I said, "Well, I am under the protection of neither. And Allah in His infinite wisdom knows that and put me in this position. So how can you say that I am an anomaly?"

Once places of belonging, many participants' Muslim communities became a source of fear and rejection, causing them to reexamine and reformulate the meaning of Islam and community in their lives. While the processes of *disengaging* and *breaking free* reported by Landenburger (1989) and Merrit-Gray and Wuest (1995), respectively, referred to changes in the relationship between victims and abusers, participants' stories of leaving highlighted changes in family, community, and spiritual connections. For participants, the processes of *disengaging* and *breaking free* occurred most powerfully at the group level, supporting Haj-Yahia's (2000) assertion that individually focused approaches to working with battered women may not be appropriate for use with women from group-oriented cultures.

Spiritual Awakening—Reclaiming the Self

Although community disapproval of victims was harmful, and in some cases progressed to the point of abuse at the community level, for some women these alienating experiences served as a bridge to spiritual awakening.

This exemplar comes from a woman who previously had been an orthodox Muslim. She now is a free thinker in matters of faith:

> You know that fatalistic attitude that a lot of Muslims have, whatever is Allah's will, okay, I went through that period, but then it is at the point where now it is Allah's will, but it is also up to me to determine how I am going to proceed with my life and my kids' lives. And that whole process kind of freed me up in some ways. In some ways it was liberating and in some ways it was also kind of terrifying to have to start thinking about the bigger picture and then to realize and be able to separate myself and say, "Well, is that really true and why did I believe it?" A lot of the little things that looking back now it is almost hard to even conceptualize that I lived the way I did for so long and that my kids lived that way. I cannot say it was a bad way, but I cannot say it was a good way either. *But I had to be out of it to be able to see it* [emphasis added]. I think my big mistake was in believing, like a lot of Muslim converts, that I have accepted Islam, the past is over, the bad is over, it is all good, we are all perfect, Islam is perfect. You know, go through the motions, follow the formula, and be guaranteed *jenna* and also have a really great social setting for yourself in this life. And that is not how it works. And anybody who believes that is in for a serious awakening when they find themselves in a trauma that cannot allow them to maintain that lifestyle. And so in that respect I am very grateful I had to go through it because it has reawakened my spirituality as to why I became Muslim in the first place.

While trying to be obedient and live up to Muslim community norms, this participant experienced a loss of self (*nafs*) (Hassouneh-Phillips, in press), a phenomenon that has been similarly reported in other violence research (Landenburger, 1989; Merrit-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Mills, 1985). Paradoxically, in this sample of American Muslim women, *reclaiming the self* tended to occur when women were most alienated from their communities. The loss of community, although painful, freed women from the constraints of group norms, allowing their individuality to emerge unchecked. Another participant described a similar experience:

> I think that my understanding of Islam came more so from having to run away from that particular community and be with the people who are

"not Muslim." And then that is where I was able to look outside of that. I was able to see. I could do like comparison, well I like the idea of prayer, I like this idea of modesty.... It was outside of that community and with people who are "not Muslim" that I was able to gain a better understanding of it.

Intimate partner abuse and social ostracism had a powerful effect on participants. Unfortunately, rather than challenge those who had wronged them, some women internalized their abuse and became ill over time. Alternatively, women who were able to be critical of their communities and remain distant experienced a *reclaiming of the self*. These women were able to gain new insight and new meaning in their lives as they developed different and more empowering understanding of their abuse experiences and of their faith. Asserting their right to interpret Islam independently was part of this healing process—a process of *reclaiming the self*.

DISCUSSION

Participants' experiences of leaving abusive partners were family and community focused. Through every stage, *reaching the point of saturation*, *getting khula*, *facing family and community disapproval*, and *reclaiming the self*, participants' group orientation shaped their thoughts, perceptions, and interactions. It is noteworthy that although participants in this study were all residents of the United States and were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, their experience of leaving appears to be more similar to reports of Arab Muslim women's experience than to their fellow North Americans. These findings point to the significance of group orientation in leaving abusive relationships and highlight the need to avoid broad application of individually focused research findings across cultures.

The group orientation of American Muslim women's experience of leaving speaks to the need for the development of interventions at the community level. In partnership with Muslim communities, health care providers should foster community education and training programs for the purposes of building a base of support for abused women within their communities. The development of educational materials designed for the Muslim reader and a safe network for referral and advocacy are initial steps that both advocates and health care providers should take. In addition, the development of culturally sensitive services for American Muslims in health care settings, shelters, and other service areas must be a priority. Research efforts should include investigations to further explore abused American Muslim women's experiences as well as those of women from other group-oriented cultures. These investigations should

attend to variations in ethnicity, religion, and locale to supply service providers with detailed and accurate information about intimate partner abuse as it occurs in a variety of cultural groups. All of these steps are crucial in view of the seriousness of the problem of intimate partner violence and the health care systems' stated commitment to provide culturally competent care for diverse populations (Meleis, 1999; Phillips, 1998).

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