Introduction

• The presence of abuse with an intimate partner is a growing concern among college women in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Justice:
  - Women between the ages of 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rates of intimate violence (IPV) - 20 per 1,000 women.
  - Of these women, over 53% of IPV victims are abused by a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).
- Nearly half of female victims (47%) were between 18 and 24 years of age when they first experienced violence by an intimate partner (Black et al., 2010).
• According to Black and colleagues (2010), women are more likely than men to:
  - Disclose IPV victimization.
  - Become victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner (24% vs. 14%).
  - Experience multiple forms of IPV, both across their life span and within individual violent relationships.
• The decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship, is influenced by several factors, and women are often faced with balancing different strategies between staying and leaving (Lindgren & Renck, 2008).
• Rosen & Stith (1995) have expanded women’s disentanglement decision processes to include:
  - Seeds of doubt, turning points, reappraisals, self-reclaiming actions, object-level reflections, last straw events, and paradigmatic shifts.
  - There lies an important step towards analyzing rationales disclosed by women who choose to stay, leave, and/or return to relationships.
• Acceptance “I don’t feel like I change myself when I’m with him. I feel like I’m just myself, which is a good thing.”

Methodology

Participants:
• Twenty-five college women who had reported affirmative answers on the conflict tactics scale (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), indicating abuse within a relationship within the past six months.
• Mean age = 18.04, SD = 0.2, Range = 18-19

Procedure:
• Recruitment: Participants (N = 276) completed an initial paper-and-pencil survey and those with affirmative answers to victimization items on the CTS2 (n = 61) were contacted for subsequent interviews.
• Interview: Participants (n = 25) were interviewed with guided questions by one of two faculty interviewers. One of the 25 participants was excluded from the analyses due to an inconsistency in victimization reporting (n = 24). Interviews were conducted every six months throughout each participant’s four-year college career for use in a larger study. Time 1 interviews were used for the present investigation. Each participant was identified as a “stayer” or “leaver” based on her self-reported relationship status at the time of the Time 1 interview.
• Data Coding: Interview transcriptions were coded to identify reasons for staying and leaving to calculate the frequencies of these reasons. Reasons were identified by five coders and notes throughout the written transcriptions. Transcriptions were coded twice by different coders for inter-rater reliability.
• Theme Identification: Reasons for staying and leaving were evaluated for frequency. Several themes for reasons for staying and leaving were identified by coders and then collapsed to identify the most overarching reasons for staying and leaving. The final list was then assessed for frequency in Time 1 interviews to examine the most important reasons for staying and leaving.

Results

Rationale Behind Staying: Quotation Examples
Comfort “I think that the relationship’s better now than when it started...I just feel like we’re a lot closer and more comfortable with each other.”
Hope “The first year was so good, like we wouldn’t fight, he literally treated me like a princess and then he started doing that stuff so I was like well, he could go back to that... but then it would go back again, it just kept me in because when he was nice it was awesome and I was so happy.”
Acceptance “I don’t feel like I change myself when I’m with him. I feel like I’m just myself, which is a good thing.”

Rationale Behind Leaving: Quotation Examples
Life “We broke up once senior year because I didn’t want a boyfriend for college because I felt like I would always have someone there watching my every move... I feel like I wouldn’t be able to get the full experience.”
Disatisfaction “He kept trying to talk to me and I was like “No, I need better for myself”, this is what I’m trying to do, be happy. And he wasn’t making me happy”
Emotional Stressor “He was very, very controlling and very jealous... He would check my phone when I didn’t know. I broke up with him like two different times because it was lot very fast cause he was just so crazy.”

Discussion

• The objective of this study was to further investigate factors influencing women’s decision to leave or stay in an abusive relationship.
• Our results show that 62.5% of participants stayed in their abusive relationship, while 37.5% of the participants left.
• Of the subjects who left, dissatisfaction (88.9%) and emotional stressors (88.9%) were the most commonly reported leaving variables.
• Of the subjects who stayed, hope (73.3%) and comfort (100%) were the most frequently reported staying variables.
• This study demonstrates that the presence of abuse with an intimate partner is a major factor in the decision to stay in an abusive relationship, while dissatisfaction and emotional stressors may be factors that influence the decision to leave the relationship.
• Out of the subjects who left the relationship, dissatisfaction and emotional stressors were the most frequently out of the leaving variables.
• The data show that dissatisfaction plays a major role in the decision to leave an abusive relationship because dissatisfaction is reported at high rates and percentages by subjects who left the relationship.

Limitations of our study included: the use of a small sample of undergraduate students and the range of abuse reported by subjects differed greatly in who was perpetrating, as well as emotional, physical, and sexual severity.
• Despite these limitations our frequencies present an opportunity for further research to be done in this field. Researchers could consider investigating specific variables of hope, dissatisfaction, and emotional stress that may lead to the decision to leave or stay in an abusive relationship.
• This study and future research can be used to improve advocacy and awareness programs involving IPV, so victims can make more informed decisions about staying or leaving in their relationships.

References