LEAVING AN ABUSIVE PARTNER: EXPLORING MOTHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY USING THE STAGES OF CHANGE MODEL

BY

LYNDAL BEE LIAN KHAW

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human and Community Development in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Assistant Professor Jennifer L. Hardesty, Chair
Associate Professor Ramona Faith Oswald
Professor Robin L. Jarrett
Assistant Professor Jessica G. Burke
ABSTRACT

The Stages of Change Model has been used by researchers and practitioners to explore women’s process of leaving an abusive partner. However, the utility of the model is limited because it does not account for the changes in relational boundaries unique to the process of leaving. Using a feminist perspective and family stress theory as guiding frameworks, the current study sought to expand the strength-based Stages of Change Model to include the potential influence of boundary ambiguity on women’s process of leaving. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 abused mothers who had temporarily or permanently left an abusive partner. Data were collected and analyzed using grounded theory methods. Results identified various types and indicators (or evidence) of boundary ambiguity in different stages of change. For most mothers in this study, fluctuations between being psychologically present and absent kept them in and out of their relationships over multiple separations, suggesting the dual influence of boundary ambiguity as a barrier and facilitator to change. Overall, the integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model addresses current limitations of the model and further highlights the process of leaving as a systemic, fluid and nonlinear process. Results also illustrated the importance of psychologically and physically separating from an abusive partner in maintaining separation and achieving boundary clarity. The results have important implications for research, theory development and practice with abused mothers.
To my Mum and Dad
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of some key individuals. First, I would like to honor and acknowledge my advisor and dissertation chair Dr. Jennifer L. Hardesty, for being a role model and for believing in me and my work. I am grateful for the time and effort she has invested in fostering my professional growth and scholarship. I also acknowledge my dissertation committee members, Dr. Ramona Faith Oswald, Dr. Robin Jarrett and Dr. Jessica Burke, for their support and feedback. Much thanks to the Jessie Bernard Award from the Feminism and Family Studies Section of NCFR and the Dissertation Enhancement Award from the Pampered Chef Family Resiliency Program for funding this study.

Additionally, I would like to thank my friends who have supported my endeavors in so many ways, including: weekly meals or coffee breaks with the “dual degree dropout,” bold excursions to Chambana’s finest Chinese buffet restaurants, countless texts and e-mails of support (some with lots of emoticons), and the many tearful phone therapy sessions. In particular, I thank Elissa, Kate, Hyeyoung, Silke, Nishah, Carolyn, Celina, Brian, Huey Sien, Suyin, Yan Ling and Jessica, for their amazing gift of friendship. I would also like to acknowledge my family, specifically my parents Sim Min and She Moy, and my siblings Eileen and Edwin, who have tirelessly supported my educational and career goals from Malaysia, via encouraging e-mails, phone calls and prayers (and even offers to edit my dissertation). I am so thankful for my pet children Cadbury, Darwin and Josie, whose presences are constant sources of joy, love and comfort in our home. I especially would like to acknowledge my husband Brian who has always been there for me through thick and thin. His love, positive strength and laughter had helped me get through this process. Finally, I honor the mothers who participated in this study. They are amazing survivors whose voices tell a compelling story of agency and courage.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ..............4
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS ......................................................................................24
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS .........................................................................................38
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION ....................................................................................71
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS .................................86
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION ..............................................................................98
REFERENCES ...........................................................................................................101
FIGURES AND TABLES ..........................................................................................113
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ...................................................................129
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER ...................................................................135
APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER .....................................................................136
APPENDIX D: TELEPHONE SCRIPT AND SCREENING SHEET ...............................137
APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM ...........................................................139
APPENDIX F: RESOURCE LIST FOR PARTICIPANTS ............................................142
APPENDIX G: SAMPLE MAP USING THE STAGES OF CHANGE TIMELINE ...........143
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................144
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as any acts of physical and/or sexual assaults committed by a former or current intimate partner that often occur within a context of coercive control (Campbell & Boyd, 2000). Statistics illustrate that IPV is an urgent public health problem as one in five women have reported being physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), resulting in approximately 5.3 million victimizations, 2 million injuries and 1300 deaths annually for women age 18 years and older (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). An important research agenda in the field of IPV is to understand the process of leaving abusive partners. Research suggests that leaving an abusive partner is a process that involves multiple stages, rather than a single isolated event (Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997). One model that has been used to theorize this process is the Stages of Change Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). The Stages of Change Model is a comprehensive strength-based model of behavior change that was developed based on clinical observations of individuals changing their own maladaptive behaviors (e.g., smoking). When applied to the process of leaving, the model effectively outlines how women leave an abusive partner in five stages that are ordered based on women’s readiness to leave (Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O’Campo, & Maman, 2001). Thus, a woman in an earlier stage in the model would be less ready to leave her abusive partner compared to a later stage. In the Stages of Change Model, the desired outcome of the process of leaving is the woman’s sustained separation from her abusive partner.

Many IPV studies have examined the applicability of the model with abusers undergoing batterers’ intervention programs (e.g., Babcock, Canady, Senior, & Eckhardt, 2005) and increasingly with abused women who are in the process of leaving (Anderson, 2003; Burke,
Although the Stages of Change Model is a useful theoretical model for understanding behavioral change, the model has important limitations when applied to the process of leaving an abusive partner. Specifically, because the model focuses on individuals’ efforts to change their own behaviors (e.g., a smoker’s efforts to cease smoking), it fails to account for the relational components that may be unique to the process of leaving (Brown, 1997). Namely, women make decisions to leave within the context of partner and parenting relationships that may influence not only individual family members but also their family structures. For example, women may take their children with them when they leave and then coparent with their former partners across different households, consequently altering family dynamics and boundaries. One potential co-occurring process that has yet to be explored in studies on the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model is boundary ambiguity (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009).

Boundary ambiguity is a perceptual state in which an individual is uncertain about who is in or out of the family system (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Although known to influence families experiencing separation (e.g., Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999), boundary ambiguity has not been studied as a mechanism specific to the process of leaving an abusive partner. Because boundary ambiguity is a perception, it may be a critical cognitive barrier affecting women’s ability to sustain change (i.e., to remain separated from their partners).

How women perceive family boundaries may be influenced by the larger social context (Boss, 2002). For example, research has documented various sociostructural factors (e.g., gender
and race) that either constrain or enable women’s strategies for leaving and achieving safety (Davies, Ford-Gilboe, & Hammerton, 2009). Thus, abused women may be perceiving boundary ambiguity within a broader context of gendered ideologies (e.g., being a mother) that influence their decisions and actions in the process of leaving. This potential link between women’s perceptions and the broader social context combines family stress theory and the Stages of Change Model with a feminist perspective. Thus, this study explored a theoretical expansion of the Stages of Change Model that incorporates the potential role of boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving among a sample of abused mothers and situates ambiguity about family boundaries within a broader context of family and gender ideologies.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Perspective and the Process of Leaving

Historically, IPV researchers have explored why women stay in abusive relationships (e.g., Barnett, 2000; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). However, because most women do eventually leave their abusive partners (Campbell & Soeken, 1999), the lack of research on women’s experiences of leaving illustrates a major gap in the IPV literature (Moss et al., 1997). Thus, a growing research trend is to explore women’s process of leaving. Decades of feminist scholarship have identified leaving an abusive relationship as a complex process (e.g., Landenburger, 1989) that is embedded within broader sociostructural contexts that may constrain women’s decisions and actions to leave their partners (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). The gendered expectations of women in relationships and families (e.g., Davies et al., 2009) represent one important sociostructural context.

Gendered Expectations Influencing the Process of Leaving

Feminist researchers have contended that women negotiate their relationships and families based on gendered scripts that dictate their lived experiences in the process of leaving (Davies et al., 2009). These gendered scripts often involve social expectations for women in their partner and parenting roles. Heterosexual women romanticize the notion of being in a committed relationship (e.g., marriage) and living “happily ever after” (Moss et al., 1997, p. 443) with a man who loves and cares for them. Kearney (2001) described the internalization of these gendered scripts as enduring love, in which women’s deeply held desires for romantic love, commitment, and security (e.g., financially) enabled the acceptance of sociocultural expectations of caregiving and self-sacrifice for their partners in abusive relationships. Thus, as a partner, women are socialized not only to the task of preserving relationships (Price, 2005) but also to
feel personally and morally committed to preserve the relationship, particularly in marital unions (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). These gendered scripts of women as partners have been reported as barriers in the process of leaving, compelling women to stay as they try to make the relationship work (Landenburger, 1998; Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995).

Similarly, gendered scripts of being a mother may complicate the process of leaving. As the emotional worker of the family (Arendell, 1995), mothers are traditionally expected to prioritize family values, preserve kinship ties, and facilitate children’s relationships with their fathers (Kirkwood, 1993). At the same time, mothers are expected to protect their children from harm and thus may be compelled to leave for the sake of their children’s safety (Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2010). This notion is consistent with research indicating that children are often the main reason mothers stay in, leave, or return to an abusive relationship (Brownridge, 2006; Chang et al., 2010). Children are also a main reason why mothers continue to have contact with abusers after they physically leave the relationship (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). For example, abused mothers may prioritize children’s relationships with their fathers (Wuest, Ford-Gilboe, Merritt-Gray, and Berman, 2003), and they may participate in coparenting because they perceive abusers’ role as a father separate from their role as a partner (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008).

**Religious and Culture-Bound Gendered Expectations**

Gendered scripts of being a partner and a mother can be situated within religious or cultural contexts. Social expectations of being a partner and a mother appear to stem from religious stigmas surrounding divorce (e.g., “divorce is a sin”) or religious definitions of relationships or family (Yick, 2008). Marriage in the eyes of Catholics, for example, serves the purpose of procreating children, whereas protestant Christians view marriage as a sacred
covenant between two individuals that complement each other (Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007).

Similarly, Nason-Clark (2004) noted that abused women who adhered to Judeo-Christian beliefs may feel further constraints from a religion that reinforces commitment to marriage vows, the traditional nuclear family, and the concept of being a dutiful wife and nurturing mother. Women in Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) study held on to the dream and belief that marriage was “divinely ordained” (p. 548), which led to minimize and deny the abuse in their marriages.

Gendered scripts related to the process of leaving are also culture-bound. For example, studies have reported a “community code of silence” (Taylor, 2002, p. 81) adhered to by Black women who may not want to seek help because they want to protect Black men from an oppressive legal system (Collins, 1998), especially given the scarcity of marriageable Black men (Moss et al., 1997). At the same time, the gendered script of motherwork underlying Black mothering illustrates culture-specific obligations to protect the survival of their children in a society that has historically oppressed racial and cultural minorities (Collins, 1990). Thus, decisions and actions in the process of leaving among Black mothers may be specifically guided by their role as resilient fighters to protect children’s wellbeing even at the expense of their own personal safety. This notion was illustrated by Moss et al.’s (1997) study; compared to White women, Black women were more likely to fight back against their abusive partners, particularly when children were involved. Likewise, the gendered script of marianismo, invoked in Latina women’s negotiation of relationships and families, has been found to be an important influence in their willingness to leave an abusive relationship (Torres, 1991). Marianismo emphasizes women “remaining docile . . . [and] eager to please men at all costs . . . [including] enduring men’s infidelity for the sake of the family and children” (Moreno, 2007, p.349). These findings illustrate that leaving an abusive partner is a culture-bound process (Moss et al., 1997).
Taken together, gendered expectations of women in relationships and families must be considered in any study of the process of leaving. Focusing on these larger sociostructural contexts situate abused women as agents (rather than victims; Patzel, 2001) who are actively negotiating their relationships and families within these larger gendered contexts. Consistent with survivor theory (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988), research using the Stages of Change Model assumes that women are active agents who use a variety of strategies to resist their partners’ violence and protect themselves and their children (e.g., Burke et al., 2004). Thus, in contrast to Walker’s (1979) theory of helplessness, which explained why women stayed in abusive relationships, survivor theory suggests that behaviors once equated with helplessness (e.g., placating the abuser) actually reflect women’s active and deliberate protective strategies. Because the Stages of Change Model focuses on women’s change and agency in the process of leaving, it is a strength-based model that fits within a feminist perspective (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

The Stages of Change Model

Four Components of Change

The Stages of Change Model is a comprehensive model of behavior change developed through clinical observations of individuals changing maladaptive behaviors, such as alcoholism, smoking and substance abuse (Prochaska, 1994; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Prochaska et al., 1994). In essence, the Stages of Change Model includes four components of change. First, the stages of change refer to the levels of an individual’s readiness to change a certain behavior, which include precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (see Figure 1). Individuals in earlier stages (e.g., precontemplation), compared to those in later stages (e.g., action), are less ready to change and thus are less likely to succeed in changing maladaptive behaviors (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). For abused women, movements across the five
stages of change may be bidirectional and include both linear (i.e., from one stage to the next) and nonlinear (i.e., skipping stages) trajectories (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Second, the *processes of change* denote the experiential (e.g., consciousness raising) and behavioral (e.g., social liberation) strategies individuals use to initiate change (see Table 1; Brown, 1997; Prochaska et al., 1994). These strategies are central to decision-making throughout the process of leaving (Burke et al., 2004). Finally, *decisional balance* and *self-efficacy* respectively refer to the process of weighing the pros and cons of change and the individual’s level of confidence in changing his or her behaviors. Existing work demonstrates how the Stages of Change Model and these four components of change can be applied to the process of leaving an abusive partner.

*Stages of Change*

*Precontemplation.* In the first stage of precontemplation, individuals have no intention to change in the foreseeable future (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). A precontemplator is often identified as not being psychologically prepared to change as she perceives her relationship as normal (Brown, 1997). Because she has not perceived abuse to be a problem, she may deny that anything is wrong in her relationship and blame herself for the situation (Zink et al., 2004). One study showed that precontemplators are highly attached to abusers and thus exhibit low levels of emotional arousal (i.e., anger) over the abuse (Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006). In one study that compared abused women at various stages of change, precontemplators were found to be less vulnerable to symptoms of psychological distress from the abuse and reported lower levels of depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Edwards et al., 2006). Edwards and colleagues’ findings support the notion that precontemplators view their relationships through rose-colored glasses, which enables them to minimize the negative effects of the abuse and disengage from the current reality of their
situation (Shir, 1999). Clearly, precontemplators are at a stage where they are “not psychologically prepared to be making changes” (Brown, 1997, p. 12).

**Contemplation.** In the second stage of contemplation, individuals are not only acknowledging the abuse as a problem but are also beginning to seriously consider change. However, contemplators are not yet committed to leaving and often report ambivalent feelings about their relationship (Brown, 1997). For example, their desire for change may coincide with feelings of loyalty and love towards the abuser. As a result, many contemplators stay in their relationships for many years despite the abuse (Moss et al., 1997). Studies show that most individuals stay in contemplation for up to two years without taking any significant action to change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). In fact, Zink et al. (2004) suggested that contemplation be further divided into early contemplation, where women may see the relationship as abusive but choose not to act upon it, and late contemplation, in which women start to weigh the pros and cons of leaving.

**Preparation.** When an individual makes a commitment to change, she moves into the stage of preparation, which is “a stage that combines intention and behavioral criteria” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2001, p.444). Here, she recognizes the abuse as a problem, has the intention to leave, and begins to develop a plan to leave (Burke et al., 2001). For example, she may secretly arrange for a place to go to after she leaves, secure her finances or discuss safety options with a friend (Brown, 1997). Unlike other behavioral changes, however, some IPV researchers have found it difficult to delineate the preparation stage because many women make quick and spontaneous decisions to leave without much time or need for deliberate preparation (Chang et al., 2006; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). For example, using a technique called “change mapping,” Chang and colleagues traced the process of leaving among 20 women who had either
left or remained with their abusive partners. They found that, for most women, the process of leaving progressed in a nonlinear sequence, including those who moved from contemplation to action without experiencing a distinct preparation stage.

**Action.** In comparison to the preparation stage, individuals in action actually modify their behaviors and take other steps to overcome the problem (Brown, 1997). While there is no single behavioral criterion to indicate that a woman is in action, most IPV studies have defined action as behaviors aimed at keeping oneself safe from abuse, which includes leaving the abuser as well as any other active attempts to achieve safety and change the situation (Burke et al., 2001; 2009). For example, women may speak to a counselor, seek help in the community, or obtain a job (Chang et al., 2006). Unlike other behavioral changes (e.g., smoking cessation) in which behaviors at each stage are “clear and dichotomous” (Brown, 1997, p. 14), decisions and actions in the process of leaving are complex and may depend on extenuating factors such as the availability of community resources and social support (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). This stage also appears critical for many women who want to leave but for various reasons (e.g., children), do not move into the next stage of maintenance; instead, they return to an earlier stage. In the Stages of Change Model, this behavior is known as relapse and is considered a normal part of the change process (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984).

**Maintenance.** According to the Stages of Change Model, women move from action into maintenance after they have maintained behavioral change for six months. During these six months, women are “preventing relapse and consolidating the gains attained during action” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2001, p. 444). Previous studies suggest that a woman is in maintenance when she does not return to the abuser and keeps herself safe by maintaining separation as a part of developing her “ability to move on” (Burke et al., 2001, p. 1156) after leaving. Although the
Stages of Change Model assumes that permanent separation is the most desired outcome in the process of change for abused women (Brown, 1997), this outcome may not be the safest or most desired option for all women (Goodkind, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2004). For example, studies have shown that women’s risk of homicide may increase nine-fold when separating from a highly controlling partner (Campbell et al., 2003). Moreover, not all women intend to leave their partners (Byrne & Arias, 2004) and instead may employ other strategies (e.g., placating the abuser) to stay safe while remaining in the relationship (Goodkind et al., 2004).

Processes of Change

While the five stages of change illustrate what women experience in the process of leaving, the ten processes of change (i.e., the second construct of change) explicate how women move across the stages in the model. The full range of cognitive and behavioral processes of change is described in Table 1. Only a few studies have focused on women’s processes of change in the process of leaving (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Burke et al., 2004). Prior work suggests that precontemplators tend to utilize fewer processes of change compared to individuals in subsequent stages, indicating an increasing use of these processes over time (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). In the context of leaving, women use more cognitive processes (e.g., consciousness raising) in the earlier stages of precontemplation and contemplation and more behavioral processes (e.g., self-liberation) in the later stages of preparation, action and maintenance (Brown, 1997; Burke et al., 2004). Compared to other behavioral changes (e.g., smoking cessation), the process of leaving appears unique in that helping relationships (one of the process of change) are used across all five stages of change, suggesting the importance of abused women trusting, accepting, and using the support of others in order to leave their abusive partners (Burke et al., 2004; 2009).
**Decisional Balance and Self-Efficacy**

In addition to the five stages of change and the ten processes of change, the model also incorporates the constructs of decisional balance and self-efficacy. Decisional balance is the weighing of pros and cons of change. Because the pros and cons of leaving can be powerful motivators and inhibitors of change (Brown, 1997), decisional balance is consistently found throughout all stages of change (Burke et al., 2004). Burke and colleagues found that abused women resisted change and stayed in contemplation longer when they perceived the cons of leaving (e.g., severing financial and emotional ties to the abuser) as being greater than the pros of leaving (e.g., achieving nonviolence). As women gained more insight into the pros of leaving, they became more ready to leave and were better able to move into subsequent stages.

Along with decisional balance is self-efficacy, which is an abused woman’s level of confidence to leave and stay free from abuse (Burke et al., 2004). In general, abused women have greater intentions to leave if they hold more positive attitudes about leaving and feel in control of leaving the relationship (Byrne & Arias, 2004). Not surprisingly, confidence to leave the relationship tends to increase as women move across the stages of change (Brown, 1997) and plays an important role in women’s process of *reclaiming self* (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Reclaiming self is the social process of reaffirming one’s identities in the context of IPV. Survivors often report becoming more conscious of their personal power and control over their lives after they have left their abusive partner (Wuest & Merritt-Gray).

*Methods of Studying the Process of Leaving Using the Stages of Change Model*

Because the application of the Stages of Change Model to the process of leaving is relatively new, most studies have explored this area of research using qualitative methods (e.g.,
Burke et al., 2001; 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). The shared objective of these qualitative studies has been to examine the fit of the Stages of Change Model with the process of leaving abusive partners. Typically, samples have included women in maintenance (i.e., separated from their abusers for at least six months) who provided retrospective accounts of their experiences. Sample sizes have ranged from four (Anderson, 2003) to 78 women (Burke et al., 2001). In most studies, data were collected through in-depth interviews with broad, open-ended questions that asked women to share their experiences of leaving in a chronological order (e.g., Burke et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Cluss et al., 2006; Zink et al., 2004). For example, Burke et al. (2004) asked women to “walk through your relationship, starting at the point when you realized that your partner’s behavior was a problem” (p. 124).

For data analysis, researchers have coded women’s narratives for text related to the Stages of Change Model. For example, Burke et al. (2001) assigned the code “action” to text within women’s narratives that related to the actions they took to end the abuse (e.g., calling the police, going to a shelter, talking to a health care professional). To supplement women’s narratives, Chang et al. (2006) used “change maps” to chart women’s movement across the stages of change as they moved toward increased safety. Chang and colleagues found that abused women generally moved through the stages in a nonlinear fashion, including instances in which women “‘leapfrogged’ directly from one stage over another” (p. 333). Khaw and Hardesty (2007) used a variation of Chang et al.’s (2006) mapping technique with the Stages of Change Model and delineated three trajectories (one linear and two nonlinear) of leaving.

Limitations of the Stages of Change Model

Although the Stages of Change Model has helped researchers theorize the process of leaving, the model in its original form is limited in two important ways. First, the model explains
how individuals change their own problem behaviors but fails to consider that, in the process of leaving, women’s actions are in response to their partners’ problem (i.e., abusive) behaviors (Frasier et al., 2001). Second, the process of leaving occurs in a relational context (Brown, 1997) whereby women are changing within their relationships with the abusive partner and other family members (e.g., children). Unlike other types of change, in which the desired outcome is the termination of an individual’s problem behavior and therefore the outcome is individually centered (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984), the process of leaving involves a change that impacts the entire family system. Indeed, a permanent separation may not be the desired outcome for some women because of its potential negative impact on the family (e.g., breakup of the family unit; Goodkind et al., 2004). Further, separating from an abusive partner can place some women at an increased risk for violence (Hardesty & Chung, 2006). Thus, for women in the process of leaving, potential solutions are complex and typically affect not only themselves but also their partners and children. As is, the Stages of Change Model does not adequately account for the complex and systemic nature of leaving an abusive partner. Thus, little is known about how changes in relational boundaries affect women’s process of leaving as they move through the stages of change (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). Using a feminist perspective and family stress theory as guiding frameworks, the current study sought to expand the strength-based Stages of Change Model to include the potential influence of boundary ambiguity (Boss, 2002; 2006) on women’s process of leaving.

Family Stress Theory

Family stress is defined as pressure or tension in the family system (Boss, 1988; 2002), in which “family members and the family as a unit are challenged by their environment in a way that overtakes their individual or collective resources and threatens the well-being of the family.”
Family stress is primarily attributed to change, as change is often implicit in stressful events (Boss, 2002; Kazak, 1992). Specifically, IPV and victimization are potential sources of stress in the family (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Boss, 1988) because exposure to and experiences of violence can change family equilibrium and boundaries. According to family stress theory, change occurring in one component of a family will affect others and the family as a whole. As Boss (2002) noted, “whenever there is a victim, there is a victimized family” (p. 162). Indeed many IPV studies have documented the harmful consequences of IPV for families beyond the abusive partnership, such as effects on children’s adjustments, abusers’ roles as parents, and the quality of parent-child relationships (e.g., Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000).

However, no studies to my knowledge have identified the process of leaving as a source of change or stress for families experiencing IPV, with the closest exception being a review article by Anderson and Saunders (2003). In their review, Anderson and Saunders discussed the prevalence of both external stressors (e.g., financial dependence on abusers) and internal stressors (e.g., attachment to abusers) within the process of leaving and how these stressors may interact with coping resources to moderate and predict women’s responses. Although their review informs the application of family stress theory to the process of leaving, the current study extends their ideas by considering the process of leaving itself as the stressor. As a stressor, the process of leaving presumably creates change in the family system by disrupting family boundaries.

Family Stress and Boundary Ambiguity

Boss and Greenberg (1984) originally related the construct of boundary ambiguity to the ABC-X model of family stress (Hill, 1958), which explains how families respond to stressor
events. The original ABC-X model (see Figure 2) has four components: the “A-factor” refers to
the stressor event; the “B-factor” refers to the family’s available resources; the “C-factor” refers
to the family’s perceptions of the stressor event (i.e., the A-factor); and “X” refers to the
collective outcomes of A, B and C, usually expressed as family stress or crisis (Hill, 1958). Boss
and Greenberg (1984) first suggested that boundary ambiguity may either be the stressor event
(A-factor) or the family’s perception of the stressor event (C-factor). However, in the contextual
model of family stress, Boss (2002) emphasized the importance of a family’s perceptions of and
attached meanings to stressor events for determining the presence and levels of boundary
ambiguity. Thus, boundary ambiguity is now considered a “perceptual response, located
heuristically under the C-factor” (Boss, 2007, p. 107) rather than a stressor event as originally
theorized by Boss and Greenberg. Consistent with Boss (2002), the current study conceptualizes
the process of leaving an abusive partner as a stressor event (i.e., the “A-factor”) and women’s
perceptions of boundary ambiguity within this process as the “C-factor.”

A distinction between ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity is necessary, as these two
constructs are often used interchangeably and erroneously in the boundary ambiguity literature
(Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007). This confusion threatens the validity of research because
ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity are two distinct constructs (Boss, 2007). Ambiguous
loss refers to an unclear loss in which there is uncertainty or a lack of information about the
whereabouts and status of a family member (Boss, 2004). For example, the September 11, 2001,
terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City created a situation of ambiguous
loss for many because a lack of information prevented families from confirming their loss (e.g.,
families members were unsure of the status of their loved ones in the days following the attacks;
Boss, 2006). In the contextual model of family stress, ambiguous loss is a situational variable or
the “A-factor” (Boss, 2007). In contrast, boundary ambiguity is the perception of or cognitive response to the “A-factor,” which is the “C-factor” in the contextual model of family stress. In the current study, boundary ambiguity refers to mothers’ perceptions of who is in or out of the boundaries of the family system. Researchers have identified four distinct types of boundary ambiguity.

Types of Boundary Ambiguity

Boundary ambiguity is a maladaptive cognitive state of mind that blocks effective coping and stress management in families (Boss, 2002). Perceptions of boundary ambiguity emerge when “an individual is physically present but not perceived by themselves or others as a member of the family; or when an individual is physically absent but still psychologically viewed as a family member” (Leite, 2007, p. 163). The reverse scenario of boundary ambiguity is boundary clarity, in which an individual is perceived to be physically and psychologically present, or physically and psychologically absent in the family.

Boundary ambiguity was first identified in cases of non-normative (or unexpected) life situations, such as situations of unclear and traumatic loss (Boss, 1977). It was later suggested that many normative family life situations, particularly those that involve transitions and change (e.g., launching adolescents to college) can also elicit boundary ambiguity in the family (Boss, Pearce-McCall, & Greenberg, 1987). In situations of boundary ambiguity:

From a sociological perspective, the family boundary is no longer maintainable, roles are confused, tasks remain undone, and the structure is immobilized. From a psychological perspective, cognition is blocked by the ambiguity, decisions are delayed, and coping and grieving processes are frozen (Boss, 2002, p. 95).

The boundary ambiguity literature documents a host of situations of loss that could evoke the perceptions of boundary ambiguity in families (Carroll et al., 2007), which can be categorized into four types.
**Type I: Physically absent but psychologically present.** Type I boundary ambiguity occurs when one is physically absent from the family but maintains a degree of psychological presence in the family (Boss, 2007, p. 105). Stemming from her practice as a family therapist, Boss (1977) conducted interviews with families with husbands/fathers who were missing at war. The families did not know whether their loved one was alive or deceased. Boss found an emotional preoccupation with the missing husband/father, causing families to remain in limbo. In other words, these families were stuck in a state of uncertainty over their absent husbands/fathers for an indeterminate amount of time and thus were unable to grieve their loss and move on with their lives (Campbell & Demi, 2000). Type I boundary ambiguity may also occur in families experiencing separation or divorce. Specifically, after a relationship dissolves, family members may question if the former partner is still a part of the family despite being physically absent (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). In a sample of 159 individuals who had been divorced for 12 years, Peterson and Christensen (2002) found that almost all participants reported some degree of boundary ambiguity. Because of shared ties (e.g., children), boundaries in separated and divorced families can remain unclear for a long time and the task of creating new family boundaries (e.g., due to remarriage) may be challenging (Emery, 1994).

**Type II: Physically present but psychologically absent.** In contrast, Type II boundary ambiguity occurs when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent (i.e., mentally and emotionally unavailable) in the family. Studies on Type II boundary ambiguity have mostly focused on caregivers of family members with chronic illnesses (e.g., Alzheimer’s). Although these individuals are physically present, they have lost some degree of mental and emotional ability to function in the family due to their cognitive impairments (Boss, 2007). In one study, families reported being uncertain about including a psychologically absent family
member in family roles and rituals but also felt guilty if the family member was excluded (Garwick, Detzner, & Boss, 1994). In such situations, families often experience ambivalent feelings toward the family member or they may simply deny that any problem exists. Not surprisingly, studies indicate that boundary ambiguity is a major barrier to successful coping among caregivers of family members with Alzheimer’s and is associated with a myriad of negative effects, such as anticipatory grief (Boss, 1999; Sobel & Cowan, 2003), depression, and negative outlooks on family life (Boss, Caron, & Horbal, 1988; Kaplan, 2001; Mu, Kuo, & Chang, 2005). Similar to Type I boundary ambiguity, Type II impedes families’ ability to move on with their lives (Boss, 2002).

*Types III and IV: Inclusion and intrusion.* Types III and IV boundary ambiguity are unique in that they do not involve an ambiguous loss. Type III boundary ambiguity emerges when family boundaries are altered due to the addition of a new member into the family (e.g., remarried families). In these families, complexities surrounding boundary reorganization are heightened, particularly when biological children from prior relationships are involved (Pasley, 1987). These situations elicit perceptions of high boundary ambiguity in remarried families compared to first-married two-parent families (Pasley, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). Overall, boundary ambiguity due to inclusion has been associated with lower relationship quality (Stewart, 2005), lower marital satisfaction, role incongruence, and role conflict (Whitsett & Land, 1992).

Type IV boundary ambiguity, intrusion, emerges when family boundaries are intruded upon by systems and contexts outside of the family (Han & Lee, 2004; Lee, 1988; 1995). Intrusion was first conceptualized by Lee (1995) who explored the construct among clergy families and congregation members outside of the family. Lee documented examples of
boundary intrusion, including church members looking into their pastors’ homes and disciplining the pastors’ children. Unlike other types of boundary ambiguity, intrusion illustrates how external contexts interact with families to disrupt their boundaries and create family stress (Lee, 1995). Type IV boundary ambiguity is associated with higher family stress, marital and parental dissatisfaction, negative attitudes, and negative wellbeing (Han & Lee, 2004; Lee, 1999; Morris & Blanton, 1994).

Measuring Boundary Ambiguity

The Boundary Ambiguity Scale. Boundary ambiguity has been predominantly measured quantitatively. The most common method is to administer versions of the Boundary Ambiguity Scale (Boss, Greenberg, & Pearce-McCall, 1990), which can be adapted to fit the research purpose (Carroll et al., 2007). Adapting the boundary ambiguity scale to new research areas has established boundary ambiguity as a widely applicable construct in family research (Carroll et al.). Currently there are six variations of the Boundary Ambiguity Scale (Boss et al., 1990) that fit different research purposes and populations. Specifically, boundary ambiguity scales #1 through #3 are used to measure Type I boundary ambiguity (e.g., among widows, or wives whose husbands are missing-in-action). Boundary ambiguity scales #4 through #6 are used to measure Type II boundary ambiguity (e.g., among divorced adults or families caring for a family member with dementia). Because there is no cutoff score for high boundary ambiguity, the best method to interpret boundary ambiguity scores is to examine within-sample comparisons by examining central tendencies, variations, and correlations with other variables (Boss et al, 1990).

Qualitative methods. In their extensive review, Carroll et al. (2007) found that only a handful of published studies have used qualitative methods to study boundary ambiguity in families. Qualitative methods were mostly used to explore the relevance of boundary ambiguity
in new populations and family experiences. For example, researchers conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with families who experienced the death of a child (Brabant, Forsyth, & McFarlain, 1994), families caring for hospitalized children (Mu, Tomlinson, Huckabay, & Heims, 1997), adopted children and their birthmothers (Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000), families of mixed-orientation marriages (i.e., heterosexual women married to gay men; Hernandez & Wilson, 2007), and young unwed fathers-to-be (Leite, 2007). Other methods have included qualitative focus groups with youth whose parents are deployed at war (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass & Grass, 2007) and ethnographic observations of parents’ interactions after separation or divorce (Taanila, Laitinen, Moilanen, & Jarvelin, 2002).

Most of these studies have used thematically-based semi-structured protocols with questions tailored to a specific family experience without an explicit focus on boundary ambiguity (Carroll et al., 2007). In most cases, interview questions were created using sensitizing concepts (i.e., theoretical or practical information that helps guide the development of qualitative studies; Charmaz, 2003) from prior studies on the particular focus area (e.g., prenatal fatherhood; Leite, 2007), rather than from the boundary ambiguity literature. Because the goal of these qualitative interviews was to explore the depths of experiences, broad open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of the focus area (Patton, 1990), which researchers then related to boundary ambiguity.

Qualitative methods focused specifically on exploring boundary ambiguity are promising future research directions (Boss, 2007) for several reasons. First, qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, are helpful for capturing inconsistencies in participants’ responses, which may indicate the presence of ambiguity (Carroll et al., 2007). Second, qualitative methods may address the limitations of quantitative measures, such as the Boundary
Ambiguity Scale. For example, the wording of several scale items in the Boundary Ambiguity Scale is distress-laden and may elicit biased responses from participants. Third, qualitative methods can be used to explore boundary ambiguity in unstudied areas, which could generate insight into how the construct operates in diverse couple and family situations (Boss, 2007).

Much of the existing boundary ambiguity research has focused on families experiencing loss of membership and roles (e.g., through death, illness, or separation and divorce). Nevertheless, the breadth of these studies has allowed for the construct of boundary ambiguity to “gain a solid base of empirical support in family situations involving similar yet distinct types of loss” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 225). As evidenced by the special issue on ambiguous loss in *Family Relations* (Boss, 2007), efforts to measure and explore boundary ambiguity in different settings and with new populations are ongoing. The process of leaving an abusive partner is one area that warrants an examination of boundary ambiguity.

In an integrative review of the literature, Khaw and Hardesty (2009) theorized that the process of leaving an abusive partner had the potential to elicit boundary ambiguity and that boundary ambiguity may act as a cognitive barrier to movement through the stages of change. Their review suggested multiple sources of boundary ambiguity (women and abusers) and various types and indicators (or evidence) of boundary ambiguity throughout the five stages of change. First, Khaw and Hardesty posited that denial and ambivalence would be common responses to boundary ambiguity in precontemplation because women would not have labeled their situation as abusive. In the middle stages of change, Types I and II boundary ambiguity were theorized to be most salient as both women and abusers fluctuated in their physical and psychological presence/absence in the relationship. Finally, boundary ambiguity was theorized to
emerge in maintenance as women attempted to renegotiate family boundaries after leaving, purpose, conceptualization, and development of the current study.

Toward this end, the purpose of this dissertation research was to integrate boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model to explain how boundary ambiguity influences women’s process of leaving an abusive partner. The integration of these distinct bodies of literature reflects a feminist interdisciplinary approach toward developing a nuanced understanding (Kitch, 2007) of the process of leaving by taking into account complex relational processes (e.g., emerging perceptions of boundary ambiguity) that may be influencing how and why women leave abusive relationships. As such, the current study was attentive to various socio-structural conditions (e.g., abusers’ power and control, social expectations of mothers and families) influencing perceptions of boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving. For example, given social expectations for mothers to keep families together and maintain kinship ties (Price, 2005), mothers in the process of leaving may feel that they are violating their socially-prescribed roles and obligations (i.e., they should stay in the relationship because they are supposed to keep families together). These social expectations may subsequently affect mothers’ decisions to leave and sustain separation (i.e., achieve boundary clarity) from their abusive partners.

Thus, guided by a feminist perspective and family stress theory, the current study examined three overarching research questions: 1) What are the types and indicators of boundary ambiguity that emerge across the Stages of Change Model? 2) How do different types of boundary ambiguity influence mothers’ decisions and actions in the process of leaving? and 3) How do mothers manage their perceptions of boundary ambiguity?
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Grounded Theory Methods

For this study, I utilized grounded theory methods, which are systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories that are “grounded” in the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory methods were appropriate for several reasons. First, grounded theory methods are useful for generating theory about understudied social processes (e.g., boundary ambiguity) that have yet been established or validated with new populations (e.g., abused women in the process of leaving). Second, grounded theory methods are useful for discovering variations in perceptions and experiences (Charmaz, 2006), and thus are implicitly feminist (Clarke, 2007). Feminist researchers (e.g., Wuest, Ford-Gilboe, Merritt-Gray, & Lemire, 2006) posit that grounded theory methods are ideal for exploring the diversity in women’s lived experiences (i.e., the process of leaving) as these experiences are constructed by dynamic sociostructural discourses, particularly related to gender, race, and culture (De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005). For example, in this study, I explored variations in mothers’ process of leaving by delineating experiences within each stage of change and how gender, race, and culture may relate to their varied experiences. Consistent with feminist methodology, mothers’ subjective perceptions and experiences of boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving were considered to be legitimate and valid sources of knowledge (De Reus et al., 2005; Wuest, 1995). Finally, grounded theory methods are helpful for researchers who want to understand women’s issues because these issues are often enmeshed in social relationships (Benoliel, 2001). Specifically, grounded theory methods enable the exploration of complex relational processes (Morse, 2001). For women in the process of leaving, potential actions and decisions are complex and typically affect not only themselves but also their partners and children. Because the current
Stages of Change Model does not adequately account for the complex and systemic nature of leaving an abusive partner, grounded theory methods were ideal for exploring boundary ambiguity as a relational component in the model. As depicted in Figure 3 and described in the following sections, the grounded theory process utilized in this study was dynamic and iterative.

*Developing the Interview Protocol*

Guided by the stages of change and boundary ambiguity literatures, I developed a semi-structured interview protocol for the current study (see Appendix A). To verify the relevance, importance and clarity of the interview protocol, I utilized the Delphi technique (Burns & Grove, 1987) by seeking input from four IPV professionals in the community (three females and one male) who agreed to review the interview protocol. Of the four professionals, three had facilitated support groups for abused women (M = 6 years) and two self-disclosed as IPV survivors. Along with the interview protocol, I mailed them a form explaining the purpose of the study and requesting a thorough review of each interview question. Their feedback was used solely for the purpose of improving the quality of the interview protocol. In general, the reviewers provided suggestions for communicating the purpose of the study to the participants, enhancing the clarity of questions, and organizing the various sections of the protocol. I revised the interview protocol based on their collective feedback.

The interview protocol consisted of four sections. Consistent with grounded theory methods and feminist methodology, interview questions were broad with probes to allow for elaboration and definition in order to facilitate mothers’ process of “telling about [their] experience” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 176).
Section A: Family Diagram, Abuse History and Beginning of Relationship

Participants were first invited to draw a diagram of their family (defined as whomever they considered as a part of their family) at the beginning of their relationship. This method was a simplified version of constructing a family genogram, which allows exploration of complex family relationships and processes (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). For interviews conducted by phone, I drew family diagrams based on participants’ descriptions and described them back to the participants to check for accuracy.

Family diagrams were followed by an exploration of the participants’ early abuse experiences and an assessment of boundary ambiguity emerging in the early stages of change. Participants were asked to describe their experiences chronologically to determine a timeline of their process of leaving. For example, I asked participants to “tell me about the time when your relationship with your (former) partner began,” followed by “Describe the first time when you were aware that there was a problem with your relationship,” and “Thinking back on your (former) partner’s behaviors, to what extent do you think that his behaviors changed over time before you decided to leave?” To explore boundary ambiguity, I asked questions derived from the Boundary Ambiguity Scale (Boss et al., 1990). For example, I asked, “What was your children’s relationship like with their father before you left?” to explore abusers’ psychological absence or presence as a father in the early stages of change.

Section B: Decisions to Leave (and Return)

In this section, I explored how mothers made their decisions to leave. Participants were asked to “tell me about the time when you decided to leave,” followed by “What were some of the reasons why you left?” To identify the preparation stage, I asked, “To what extent do you think planning was a part of your leaving?” For those who experienced multiple separations, I
asked them to describe their most recent or memorable experience of leaving. Further, I asked these women their reasons for returning and how their experiences of leaving differed over time.

Section C: Current Family Relationships and Boundary Ambiguity

Questions in this section assessed mothers’ current family relationships and potential perceptions of boundary ambiguity. First, I asked participants to draw a second family diagram (once again, defined as whomever they considered as a part of their family) at the present time. Next, I asked them to “walk me through what is different” between their first and second family diagrams and explain “how has your family changed compared to the beginning of your relationship.” Participants who noted no differences between the diagrams were further probed for their “thoughts about your family being the same after your experiences of leaving.” To explore boundary ambiguity (i.e., incongruence in abusers’ psychological and physical presence in mothers’ lives after separation), I asked, “To what extent do you consider your (former) partner as a part of your life?” and “Describe your children’s relationship with your (former) partner now.”

Section D: Future Plans

In the final section of the interview protocol, I explored mothers’ current plans (e.g., “What are your current priorities for you and your family?”), their advice for other abused women (e.g., “If you were to give advice to other mothers who are experiencing a similar situation, what would you tell them?”), and their hopes for the future (e.g., “How do you foresee your future relationship with your (former) partner over the next five years?”) In addition to identifying where a participant was and where she may go next in the stages of change, these final questions were designed to give women a sense of strength and hope for the future by closing the interview on a positive note (Charmaz, 2006).
Data Collection

Participant Recruitment

University of Illinois IRB approval was obtained in February 2008 to ensure the ethical protection of participants throughout the research process (see Appendix B). To obtain a sample with diverse experiences, I recruited participants from various urban (Champaign, Danville, Decatur, Rockford, and Urbana) and rural areas (Shelbyville and Tuscola) in the Midwest. Each location’s urban or rural influences were defined by the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau. I also recruited outside of Champaign-Urbana to extend beyond the university community, which has been overtargeted for research participation. Recruitment flyers (see Appendix C) were posted and distributed widely at various domestic violence and homeless shelters (with staff consent), community locations (e.g., daycare centers, coffeehouses, libraries, bookstores, grocery stores), and on websites targeting general community audiences (e.g., online community blogs for mothers, childcare section on Craigslist.com). Flyers were titled, “U of I Research Study on Moms” followed by two questions: “Has your child’s father ever physically hurt you?” and “Are you currently trying to leave your relationship?” The flyer also included a general statement: “We would like to talk to moms in this situation who have ever separated (either temporarily or permanently) from their partners.” For participants’ safety and discretion, pull tabs with my contact information (i.e., office phone number and email address) were attached to the flyer. This approach allowed potential participants to make the initial call to inquire about the study at a safe time and place.

With the exception of a few (e.g., Burke et al., 2001; 2009), most process of leaving studies using the Stages of Change Model have sampled only women who were permanently separated from their abusive partners (i.e., in maintenance) and who reported their experiences
retrospectively. Because boundary ambiguity often changes over time for individuals and families (Boss et al., 1990), I sought to capture mothers’ current perceptions of boundary ambiguity at different stages of change. Thus, I used theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) to recruit participants at all stages of change, not just maintenance. Specifically, after initial recruitment resulted in a sample of mothers mostly in maintenance, I adjusted the recruitment strategy to target mothers in other stages. For example, to recruit more mothers who had recently left their partners (i.e., the action stage), I extended recruitment efforts to domestic violence shelters and transitional housing centers.

During the initial call from potential participants, I explained the study’s purpose and procedures, as outlined in the telephone script and screening sheet (see Appendix D). If the woman was interested in participating, I screened her to determine her eligibility for participation. Women were eligible if they: 1) had at least one child under 18 with their current or former partner, 2) had been separated from that partner at some point, regardless of whether they remained separated at the time of recruitment, and 3) had been physically hurt or threatened to be physically hurt by that partner on more than one occasion. To address criteria 1 and 2, I asked “Do you have a child under age 18 with your current/former partner?” and “Regardless of whether you are currently with your partner, have you ever experienced leaving or separating from him at any point throughout your relationship?” If the woman responded yes to both, I screened her for criterion 3. To do so, I utilized a physical abuse and coercive control checklist derived from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Sample items included: “Throughout your relationship, has your current/former partner ever hit or punched you?” and “Throughout your relationship, has your current/former partner ever limited your contact with others?” By asking about IPV last, women
who did not meet the first two criteria were precluded from answering questions that may cause distress. Women who met all three criteria and agreed to participate were asked to identify a safe time and place to meet for an interview.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted at a private university office or other safe location (e.g., domestic violence shelter, participant’s home, public library) agreed upon by me and the participant. Two participants requested to be interviewed by phone. For safety purposes, I had a cell phone with me at all times and only travelled within 120 miles of Champaign-Urbana to conduct interviews. At the start of the interview, I gave participants an informed consent form (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to read the consent form; for phone interviews, I read the consent form to them. The informed consent form contained general information about the study, participants’ rights and safety considerations, and the potential benefits and risks incurred by participating in the study. When participants agreed to continue, I asked for their permission to digitally record the interview. Interviews lasted between 1.5 to 4 hours ($M = 2.3$ hours); the one 4-hour interview was completed over two separate meetings. Participants received $30 for their participation; two women chose to donate their payments to a local domestic violence organization on their own. I also provided all participants with a resource list (see Appendix F) that contained information about local and national resources on IPV and parenting. With the assistance of two undergraduate research assistants, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcriptions were checked for accuracy against the digital recordings.

Upon completion of each interview, I wrote an initial memo that included my reflections on the interview process (e.g., how the interview went, any problems that were encountered), observations of the participant’s experiences in the process of leaving (e.g., her current stage of
change, potential boundary ambiguity indicated by her family diagrams), and comparisons of the participant’s experience to others’ experiences and to the developing theoretical explanation (e.g., the types and indicators of boundary ambiguity that emerged in different stages of change). These memos were verbally dictated into a digital recorder and later transcribed verbatim. This approach is consistent with Charmaz’s (2006) suggestion that grounded theory researchers write initial memos as a way to “get ideas down as quickly and clearly as you can” (p. 84). Memo-writing was an important process for developing initial codes that were utilized in the next step of data analysis.

Data Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory methods, data collection and data analysis were concurrent. Data were stored and analyzed using NVivo 8.0 qualitative data management software (QSR International, 2008). Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) guidelines for open, axial and selective coding were used.

Open Coding

Open coding is the process in which ‘data are broken down into discrete parts and labeled (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first five interviews were open coded using an initial codebook containing a priori codes or sensitizing concepts from the Stages of Change Model and boundary ambiguity literatures. Each interview was independently coded by me, my advisor, and two undergraduate research assistants. First, each coder identified specific texts from the interview transcripts that reflected the different stages of change. For example, texts that included mothers’ talk about denial were coded as “precontemplation.” After coding for each stage of change, each coder used a technique similar to Chang et al.’s “change mapping,” in which each transcript was organized into a timeline based on the stages of change. In other words, each coder individually
mapped various events and interactions in the transcript onto the stages of change timeline (see Appendix G for an example). To explore boundary ambiguity, each coder identified texts that illustrated physical and psychological presence or absence. For example, in action, we coded mothers’ reports about missing their abusive partners after leaving as “physically absent but psychologically present.” Each coder then added reports of mothers’ and abusers’ physical and psychological absence or presence onto the timeline. Thus, each timeline offered a visual of a mother’s perceptions of boundary ambiguity (i.e., incongruence between physical and psychological presence) as she moved through the stages of change.

In addition to using sensitizing concepts, each coder also identified emergent codes or codes that emerged from the narratives that were not identified a priori. For example, the code “adapting” emerged after mapping mothers’ movement from precontemplation into subsequent stages of change before returning to precontemplation again. After independently coding each of the first five interviews, the coding team met as a group to compare codes and maps. The team thoroughly discussed each interview until consensus was reached. The codebook was revised as needed after each meeting (e.g., to add emergent codes or clarify definitions of codes). Previously coded interviews were then recoded using the updated codebook.

Axial Coding

The next step of data analysis was axial coding, in which connections were made between codes or phenomena in the data (e.g., associations between specific stages of change and types of boundary ambiguity) to bring data back into a coherent whole (Charmaz, 2006). Axial coding was conducted using a coding paradigm that explores four interrelating factors to understand specific phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To illustrate these factors, I will use “mothers’ psychological absence in contemplation and preparation” as an example phenomenon.
The first factor is *facilitating conditions*, or happenings that create the phenomena. An example condition that facilitated psychological absence in contemplation and preparation was mothers’ increasing awareness of the abuse as a problem. The second factor is *context*, or the larger social milieu within which the phenomenon takes place. In this study, women became psychologically disconnected (or absent) from their relationship in the context of motherhood. For example, as they contemplated or prepared for change, mothers considered the impact of their decisions on children’s safety and relationships with their father. The third factor is *action/interactional strategies*, or ways individuals respond to, handle, or manage the phenomenon. For example, to manage their psychological absence from the relationship in contemplation and preparation, mothers physically left the relationship – an action aimed at achieving boundary clarity. Finally, the fourth factor is *consequences*, or the outcomes of using specific action/interactional strategies. For example, physically leaving the relationship often resulted in mothers once again feeling psychologically connected to their partners. As illustrated, Strauss and Corbin’s four-factor coding paradigm helped me to identify connections between codes related to the stages of change and boundary ambiguity.

*Selective Coding*

In the final stage of selective coding, I integrated the relationships identified through axial coding into a “theoretical story” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 850) that explained how boundary ambiguity operates as women move across the stages of change. Specifically, the theoretical story that emerged from the data explains how boundary ambiguity acts as both a facilitator and barrier in the process of change, producing complex and dynamic trajectories of leaving. To verify that the theoretical story fits the data, initial interviews were reexamined with the
emerging model as analysis progressed. Diagramming and memo-writing were used to facilitate axial and selective coding.

Diagramming. Diagramming is a technique used to represent concrete images of emerging ideas (Charmaz, 2006) in order to draw connections between developing constructs (Clarke, 2003). In axial coding, I used situational mapping technique by first creating a variation of a messy map or “a preliminary map that roughly lays out all the elements you (the researcher) think may be in that situation” (Clarke, 2005, p. 267) for each phenomenon. To illustrate this process, I will again use mothers’ psychological absence in contemplation and preparation. In the messy map, I free wrote all codes that might relate to mothers’ psychologically disconnecting from the relationship, such as “didn’t want to be there,” “worrying about children’s safety,” and “increasing awareness of the abuse as a problem.” Whenever possible, I used invivo codes, or codes derived from participants’ narratives; for example, the code “didn’t want to be there” was stated by one mother in contemplation. Next, I made connections between codes (e.g., mothers not wanting to be there because they were worried about children’s safety) and grouped codes that were conceptually similar (e.g., worrying about children’s safety and increasing awareness of the abuse as a problem) in an ordered map (Clarke, 2003). In selective coding, I used diagramming to bring together the relationships identified in axial coding into a coherent theoretical story of the data. For example, this involved linking relationships found between mothers’ and abusers’ presence/absence and mothers’ actions throughout the stages of change. Because the purpose of the study was to develop a family-level theory of how boundary ambiguity operates in the Stages of Change Model, I included only individual and relational codes pertinent to the particular phenomenon. As such, I was only able to theorize connections between these codes, without taking into account the larger discursive elements (e.g., historical
contexts), as Clarke’s guidelines suggest. Thus, the messy maps used in this study represent an adaptation of Clarke’s (2003) situational analysis rather than an exact replication of her methods.

Memo-writing. Diagramming was often followed by memo-writing, which helped me to further refine codes, relationships, and the emerging theory. Compared to the more descriptive memos in the early stages of analysis, these memos were increasingly theoretical and conceptual. Consistent with Charmaz’s (2006) guidelines, memos in the later stages were used to explore the connections between facilitating conditions, context, and actions/interactional strategies and how these connections offer a theoretical explanation of the phenomena (i.e., boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving). Consistent with constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965), I used memos to compare codes (e.g., psychological absence) and relationships (e.g., links between psychological absence and deciding to leave) across and within participant narratives as well as to the results in prior studies.

Axial and selective coding continued until all codes and relationships were substantiated by the data and no new insights emerged from further analysis (i.e., saturation; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The final step of the grounded theory process involved writing and rewriting the dissertation to “re-present” (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 376) the data as a coherent and meaningful rendering of the theoretical story.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In this study, trustworthiness, or the degree to which results are supported by evidence and can be trusted as accurate reflections of participants’ experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was established in several ways. First, bias was reduced by investigator triangulation, or the process of analyzing interview data (including mapping) independently, comparing findings, and discussing discrepancies until reaching consensus (Denzin, 1970). Two undergraduate research
assistants, my advisor, and I participated in this process of cross-checking and verifying interpretations. Throughout the process, I also consulted with my dissertation committee members for feedback on data collection (e.g., developing the interview protocol), analysis procedures, and interpretation of findings (e.g., interpretation of boundary ambiguity in mothers’ family diagrams). Finally, I maintained thorough documentation of all data collection and analysis efforts and used participants’ quotes as evidence of the results and conclusions in this study.

Safety and Ethical Considerations

Abused women may continue to be at risk even after they leave and are in the maintenance stage (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Thus, ensuring the safety and confidentiality of all participants in this study was crucial (Campbell & Dienemann, 2001). In addition to completing a 40-hour domestic violence training at a local women’s shelter, I took multiple steps to reduce participants’ risks. First, I posted flyers about the study in community locations so that women could learn about the study and choose a safe time to contact me for more information (as opposed to me contacting them directly). Second, I preceded all phone conversations with questions about any current safety concerns (e.g., “Is it safe to talk now?”) and scheduled all interviews at predetermined safe locations and times. I also developed plans for protecting women in the event that an interview or phone call was interrupted (e.g., agreeing on a safe code the woman could use to inform me that the abuser was present, using a generic description of the study that did not reveal its focus on IPV). Furthermore, I encouraged participants to destroy any paper trails (e.g., informed consent form) that may lead to abusers’ knowledge of their participation in this study.
In addition to safety measures, I took steps to protect mothers’ confidentiality. First, participants were paid only in cash rather than checks to avoid a paper trail linking them to the study. Second, all data were accessible only to me, my advisor, and our undergraduate research assistants. Third, identifying information (e.g., names and contact information) was placed in a locked file cabinet in a university office separate from interview data. Interview transcripts and digital recordings of interviews were saved in password protected computer files. Finally, all names and other identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of results, including all participants’ quotes and family diagrams.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Results of the current study support the integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model. All mothers in this sample experienced boundary ambiguity throughout the process of leaving. The attributes and activities unique to each stage of change resulted in mothers experiencing different types of boundary ambiguity at different points in the process of leaving. In this section, I first describe the sample. Second, I report on the types and indicators of boundary ambiguity at each stage of change. Third, I discuss how each type of boundary ambiguity influenced mothers’ decisions and actions at each stage of change.

Sample Description

Twenty-five mothers participated in this study. Mothers identified themselves as White (n = 11), Black (n = 9), Hispanic (n = 3) or biracial (n = 2). They were 21 to 54 years old (M = 37.2) and attained some high school to post-Masters education (M = some college). Fourteen mothers were married and 11 were in dating or cohabitating relationships with their abusive partners. Relationships lasted from 1 to 18 years (M = 7.5). Twenty-two mothers ended their relationships between 3 months and 19 years ago (M = 5.7 years) whereas 3 mothers were in a relationship with their abusive partner at the time of the interview. Mothers had 1 to 4 children (M = 2); in two cases, abusers were not the biological fathers but fulfilled some parenting roles.

Although all mothers reported at least one episode of physical abuse during the relationship, two distinct patterns of IPV were evident. First, most mothers (n = 20) reported physical violence that occurred within a larger pattern of coercive control. For example, in addition to physical violence, they reported verbal (e.g., name-calling), emotional (e.g., belittling), psychological (e.g., threatening to kill himself), sexual (e.g., forced sex) and financial abuse (e.g., withholding wages) as well as controlling behaviors (e.g., monitoring their activities,
isolating them from their family and friends). This pattern of IPV is consistent with Johnson’s (2008) definition of intimate terrorism, in which physical violence is one tactic among many used to control one’s partner. In contrast, five mothers reported physical violence that occurred in the context of arguments or conflict, without a larger pattern of coercive control. For example, these mothers reported violence occurring during specific arguments about money or abusers’ infidelity but did not report violence at other times or controlling behaviors. This pattern of IPV is consistent with Johnson’s definition of situational couple violence, in which violence occurs in specific situations but is not a part of an overall motive to control one’s partner.

Using perceptual and behavioral markers as outlined in the Stages of Change Model literature (Frasier et al., 2001), one mother was coded as being in precontemplation, one in contemplation, five in action, and 18 in maintenance at the time of their interview. Although none were in preparation at the time of the interview, mothers provided retrospective accounts of their experiences in this stage. Table 2 summarizes mothers’ demographic characteristics by their stage of change at the time of the interview. For every example in this section, mothers’ stage of change at the time of the interview is noted in parentheses.

Types and Indicators of Boundary Ambiguity in the Stages of Change

The types and indicators (or evidence) of boundary ambiguity differed at each stage of change in the process of leaving (see Table 3). In precontemplation, Type II boundary ambiguity emerged as mothers perceived abusers to be psychologically absent while physically present as a partner and father. Multiple indicators of Type II boundary ambiguity were reported. As partners, the indicators were abusers’ violence, lessened commitment and lack of care for mothers’ wellbeing. As fathers, the indicators were abusers’ lack of involvement as a father and their emotional withdrawal from their children. Next, in contemplation and preparation, mothers
perceived Type II boundary ambiguity as they became psychologically absent while remaining physically present in the relationship. Here, indicators of boundary ambiguity included mothers’ emotional leave-taking and shifting perceptions. Then, when mothers physically left in action, they perceived Type I boundary ambiguity as their psychological attachment to the abuser resurfaced after separation. Indicators of boundary ambiguity in action included mothers’ lingering psychological attachments to the abuser and difficulties adjusting from “we” to “I.” Mothers who left multiple times \((n = 23)\) fluctuated between Type II boundary ambiguity in contemplation and preparation and Type I boundary ambiguity in action, which kept them in limbo throughout the middle stages of change. Finally, in maintenance, boundary ambiguity emerged in the form of boundary intrusion, as abusers kept themselves physically and/or psychologically present in mothers’ lives after separation. Indicators of boundary intrusion were abusers’ physical and controlling behaviors that interfered with mothers’ efforts to renegotiate family boundaries and increase boundary clarity in maintenance. I turn now to a detailed discussion of each stage of change.

_Early Stage of Change: Precontemplation_

All mothers provided retrospective accounts of their experiences in precontemplation, with the exception of one mother, Anna, who had separated from her husband multiple times but was back in precontemplation at the time of the interview. In precontemplation, abusers were perceived as physically present but psychologically absent as a partner and a father (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity). As a partner, Type II boundary ambiguity was indicated by mothers’ reports of abusers’ violence, lessened commitment and lack of care for mothers’ wellbeing. In 13 cases, Type II boundary ambiguity was also indicated by abusers’ lack of involvement as a father and their emotional withdrawal from their children. Because mothers in precontemplation did not
define the abuse as a problem and were not contemplating leaving as an option, they responded with denial and ambivalence.

*Indicators of Abusers’ Psychological Absence*

At the beginning of their relationships, all but five mothers \((n = 20)\) detailed positive experiences with their partners, which gave them high expectations for the relationship to succeed. For example, mothers used positive terms to describe their partners, such as “honest,” “good,” “took care of me,” “helpful,” “sweet” and “polite.” When asked to draw a diagram of who they perceived to be in their family at the beginning of the relationship, all mothers included their partners as members of the “core family unit” (see Figures 4 and 5 for examples of these diagrams). Indeed, these family diagrams suggest that mothers experienced boundary clarity (i.e., low boundary ambiguity) at the beginning of the relationship; in other words, they initially perceived their partners as both physically and psychologically present. Their perceptions of boundary clarity changed, however, when they began to perceive abusers as physically present but psychologically absent as a partner and father (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity).

*Psychological absence as a partner.* The first indicator of abusers’ psychological absence as a partner was abusers’ violence. At the onset of abuse, mothers faced contradictions to their original expectations for the relationship to succeed (i.e., when abusers were physically and psychologically present). Subsequently, they began to perceive an irretrievable psychological loss of their partners, in which they were unable to go back to the way things were before the abuse. As Shana (maintenance) recalled of her experiences in precontemplation, “I lost a friendship. I lost my lover. I lost my husband [and] the father of my kids. I lost everything.”

In addition to their partners becoming physically abusive, Type II boundary ambiguity was indicated by mothers’ perception of abusers as being less committed to their relationships.
than they were in the beginning of the relationship. In 12 cases, abusers reportedly initiated and maintained intimate relationships outside of the dating or marital dyad; in three of these cases, abusers explicitly told mothers that they were no longer interested in a committed relationship. In retrospect, Elena (contemplation) noted:

Everything was going very well. We were living together, paying the bills. We were having fun. We had a great time. But then all of the sudden he said, “I don’t want to be ‘it’ with anybody.” And that really confused me because . . . you know, we talked about being exclusive. . . . So pretty much [after a few months] he started distancing himself.

The third indicator of abusers’ psychological absence as a partner was abusers’ reported lack of care for mothers’ physical wellbeing. For example, almost half \( (n = 12) \) of the sample reported abuse during pregnancy, which negatively affected mothers’ health (e.g., labor complications). In several cases of intimate terrorism, abusers reportedly denied mothers’ access to food and shelter (e.g., locking mothers out of the house). Heather (action) remembered how her partner refused to pay for groceries and barred her from seeking public food assistance:

We had no money and all we had was a big bag of rice. . . . We never would have told our parents that we needed money because I knew that [that] would disturb his pride terribly. I asked if I could go to WIC (Women, Infants and Children) because we didn’t have anything to eat. He didn’t let me go because that was a government organization. . . . [Later, I found out that] he had over $20,000 in investments and over $15,000 in savings [but] he would not pay out of that for groceries. So I actually went hungry.

*Psychological absence as a father.* In 13 cases, abusers were also perceived to be psychologically absent as fathers. As Clara (maintenance) recalled, “He [was often] physically there in the room [with the kids], but not [psychologically] there.” The first indicator of abusers’ psychological absence as a father was their reported minimal involvement in parenting. For example, Daphne (maintenance) remembered how she was like “a single parent,” given the abuser’s minimal role in parenting:

Out of one hundred percent, [he was involved] maybe thirty percent. In theory, yes [he was involved], but in action, no. He would talk about what the kids needed and things
like that [but] . . . he didn’t [do much]. If my kids needed shoes, it would be my responsibility and not his. He thought his job was to buy the extra [stuff], like if he sees something when he’s out. He didn’t buy groceries, so he didn’t feed them. He fed them what I bought, or what I decided we would eat. He talked about wanting to teach my son baseball [but] . . . he never bothered to take my son along although he was old enough.

Daphne’s quote also illustrates abusers’ lack of involvement in rituals with their children, which was reported in the 13 cases where abusers were perceived as psychologically absent fathers in precontemplation. These mothers recalled how abusers often missed significant events, such as children’s birthdays and school events, and did not participate in daily routines, such as putting children to bed or helping them with homework. Because of abusers’ psychological absence as a father, several mothers felt that abusers were “incapable of being a dad.” For example, Valerie (maintenance) described her partner as being “more like an uncle [who was just] there to do this and that.” She attributed his lack of father involvement in precontemplation to not knowing how to parent:

I got no mental, physical and emotional support from him at all . . . He didn’t help with the feedings; he was going out to work every day at 5 am, so he wasn’t getting up in the middle of the night. What I saw him do is wrestle [with the boys and do] typical guys’ stuff. But as far as raising [the boys], he knows what he knows and that’s it. He can’t possibly know how to be a good father. He can’t possibly know how to sit and hold his child, read a book to him, because nobody did that with him.

In addition to being uninvolved fathers, the second indicator of abusers’ psychological absence as a partner was mothers’ perceptions of abusers as being emotionally detached fathers. Mothers reported that abusers rarely expressed affection towards their children (e.g., saying “I love you”) or did so only when prompted by mothers. For example, Heather remembered how she had to “encourage him to hug them and stuff. I don’t know if he would have done it otherwise.” Abusers’ emotional detachment from their children was also evident in reported cases of child abuse. Six mothers reported suspected or confirmed prior incidences of child abuse.
or neglect by abusers. In each case, the abuser displayed a lack of concern for his child’s wellbeing.

In retrospect, all mothers acknowledged that these indicators of abusers’ psychological absence as a partner and father should have been an early warning sign that something was wrong in the relationship. However, precontemplators typically did not perceive the abuse as a problem; thus, they were not ready to contemplate change. Instead, precontemplators responded to their perceptions of Type II boundary ambiguity (i.e., abusers’ physical presence but psychological absence) with denial and ambivalence.

Mothers’ Denial

Denial was a cognitive mechanism mothers used to alter their perceptions of reality in order to make the abuse seem more acceptable (Brown, 1997). All mothers utilized self-blame to deny their initial perceptions of boundary ambiguity resulting from abusers’ psychological absence as partners and fathers in precontemplation. In addition to self-blame, a subgroup of mothers (n = 17) who had left but later returned to precontemplation used adapting as a mechanism of selective denial to justify returning to their partners.

Self-blame. Self-blame allowed mothers to distort their perceptions of reality by claiming some responsibility for their partners’ abuse. For example, after each abusive incident, Kerry’s (action) partner “... didn’t apologize about busting up my lip or smacking me around or anything like that, [so] I start[ed] feeling really bad about [what happened].” Similarly, Anna (precontemplation) currently blamed herself by assuming she had wanted the abuse to occur:

I think [the abuse] is addictive because there were times that I maybe wanted him to get abusive with me ... I don’t know. It’s weird ... like we’d get in a fight and then we’d make up, and it’d be so great [in] the honeymoon phase ... . Yeah I think I wanted that for a while because we would get in fights and I would try to instigate them [in order to get to the honeymoon phase].
Because mothers in precontemplation were not yet ready to accept their psychological loss and contemplate leaving, they blamed themselves and denied their partners’ responsibility for the abuse. Self-blame persisted until mothers were able to move out of precontemplation (Brown, 1997).

Adapting. In addition to self-blame, 17 mothers engaged in denial through the process of adapting. Adapting was distinct among mothers who had moved out of precontemplation into subsequent stages of change before returning to precontemplation again. These mothers encountered a unique type of precontemplation in that they were not completely unaware of their situation (i.e., they knew something was wrong); however, they adapted to being in precontemplation again by changing their perceptions. As Heather (action) recollected, “I feel like I [was] lying to myself a lot, trying to convince myself that he was better than he seemed.” Thus, mothers adapted by focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship. Shana (maintenance) recalled:

The bad thing about why I stayed with him for so long [is] . . . [I was] always thinking about the good things about him instead of the negative things because that’s the way [I was taught]. Always think about the positive; always think [about when he is going to change].

Mothers often focused on the positive aspects of their relationship because of abusers’ remedial work, or deliberate tactics to create a temporary sense of boundary clarity and keep the relationship intact (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001). To create the illusion that “everything was fine” in the relationship, abusers utilized various forms of remedial work, such as apologizing for the abuse, promising to change, purchasing gifts and being affectionate towards mothers and their children. In Abigail’s (maintenance) case, every time she moved out of precontemplation, her partner used remedial work to appear psychologically present again to
draw her back to precontemplation. Consequently, Abigail remembered adapting in precontemplation with the hope that her husband would eventually change his abusive ways:

I was stupid [for going back], but I wasn’t. I got what was going on [in the relationship], but there was a little hope in me [that he would change]. . . . I had already filed for divorce once when he first beat me [but] I dropped it all and tried to make things work. A lot [of it] was [because of] what he said. He said what I wanted to hear. . . . At certain times when he really opened up to me and talked to me about things, I thought he [had] really [changed]. . . . [But then] he’d take a few steps forward and then go ten steps back [into his old self again].

An important contextual factor influencing mothers’ decisions to adapt was their desire to preserve the relationship and/or family. In terms of the relationship, mothers who were married wanted to honor their marital vows, whereas dating or cohabitating mothers idealized the possibility of a marriage with their partners. Mothers also reported the desire to preserve the family unit and maintain a secure two-parent home for their children. Thus, when abusers used remedial work to once again appear as psychologically present fathers, mothers focused on the positive: despite the abuse, the abuser was “a good father.” Mimi (maintenance) recalled:

He is, you know, an African American man that basically [took care of his child whereas] there’s a lot of African American men out here that don’t take care of their kids. And then by his daughter being handicapped that said [to me], “OK I found somebody that no matter what his daughter is going through, he is going to accept her.” You know what I’m saying? And that’s the good thing about him.

Focusing on the positives of preserving the relationship and/or family allowed mothers to deny abusers’ psychological absence despite the abuse. Anna’s present family diagram (see Figure 6) illustrates this notion. Other than the inclusion of her child (who was later born into the relationship), Anna’s present family diagram is similar to the one at the beginning of the relationship (Figure 4). The similarities in both diagrams illustrate that despite the abuse (i.e., his psychological absence as a partner) Anna maintained that the abuser was psychologically present
as “my husband” and “significant other.” At the time of the interview, she also viewed her family as intact and expressed her desire to stay in the relationship.

In most cases, decisions to preserve the relationship and/or family were tied to sociocultural and/or religious beliefs. For example, Bianca (maintenance), who lived in Mexico during the abuse, believed in the importance of preserving her marriage within a culture that held strong patriarchal beliefs about relationships. In Mexico, a divorce meant negative social and religious implications for Bianca and her children (e.g., being shunned from her family of origin); thus, despite having left, she returned to precontemplation and adapted for years solely to keep her family together. As Bianca shared, “I was very committed. . . . I was doing everything I could to save [my marriage]. . . . [because] in Mexico, [if] you do get married, it has to be for life. You are partners for life.”

Several mothers were involved in religious communities that also discouraged divorce (e.g., Christian fundamentalism). Thus, when Heather (action) sought the advice of her religious community about potentially leaving the abuser, they advised her to stay and make the marriage work. Heather noted, “You were required as a wife to never divorce [in that religious community.] If you do divorce, [they say that] you’re just going to be single for the rest of your life.” The religious stigma of divorce compelled Heather to return to precontemplation where she adapted by focusing on the positive of preserving the marriage (i.e., not becoming a single divorcee). Similarly, Jane (action) explained:

Second Corinthians [in the Bible states], “Your body does not belong to you, it belongs to your mate.” [It] just talks about divorce, that God is not pleased with divorce. . . . [You must] keep the faith that your marriage will work out. [These were] very important. That’s what kept us together, little bit we did. That’s what kept me from going and filing for divorce [even though I had contemplated it].
Along with denial through self-blame and adapting, all mothers responded to abusers’ psychological absence with feelings of ambivalence about their relationships.

**Mothers’ Ambivalence**

Being ambivalent, or having conflicted feelings towards their partners, was a common response to perceptions of boundary ambiguity. As mothers grappled with their partners’ psychological absence, they “loved” their partners while simultaneously feeling “fear” and “anger.” In 12 cases, ambivalence seemed to emerge from the perceived incongruence of abusers’ presence as a partner versus a parent. In other words, the abuser was perceived to be psychologically absent as a partner but still psychologically present as a father who cared and provided for their children. Shana (maintenance) explained this incongruence:

> He is a good dad but a horrible [partner]. He would go out of his way for his kids and it wouldn’t matter if they wanted a snack before dinner, and I would tell them, “No, you cannot have that snack,” and he would still give it to them just to make them happy. If the kids want to go to the park, he would go do it. [But] if it came down to me, he would be like, “Who cares about you Shana? I’m just going to take everything out on you. You’re just the punching bag over here.” . . . Good dad, horrible [partner].

For these 12 mothers, abusers’ psychological presence as a father but absence as a partner left them feeling ambivalent about the relationship. Mothers expressed feelings of hurt or betrayal for the way they were treated but narratives also reflected how mothers valued their partners’ emotional and physical contributions as fathers. Lana (action) recalled:

> He would separate himself from me, emotionally . . . [and after a while,] I had become kind of numb. I was having a really hard time having any emotions at all. . . . [But] I figured that was a small price to pay for somebody who provided so well and . . . was a really good father.

In sum, mothers’ retrospective and current perceptions of precontemplation revealed Type II boundary ambiguity emerging as abusers became psychologically absent as a partner and father while physically present in the relationship. As a partner, Type II boundary ambiguity was
indicated by mothers’ reports of abusers’ violence, lessened commitment and lack of care for mothers’ wellbeing. In 13 cases, Type II boundary ambiguity was also indicated by abusers’ lack of involvement as a father and their emotional withdrawal from their children. However, because mothers in precontemplation were not yet ready to contemplate change, they responded to boundary ambiguity with denial and ambivalence. Denial was evident in two forms: self-blaming and adapting. Mothers blamed themselves for the abuse by taking partial or total responsibility for their partners’ abusive behaviors and adapted by focusing on the positive aspects of preserving the relationship and family unit. Mothers who perceived abusers as psychologically present as a father but not as a partner reported ambivalence about their relationships. Once mothers began to contemplate change, they moved into the middle stages of change.

**Middle Stages of Change: Contemplation through Action**

At the time of the interview, six mothers were coded as being in the middle stages of change (i.e., one in contemplation, none in preparation and five in action). These six mothers provided both current and retrospective stage-based accounts. The remaining 19 mothers’ accounts were retrospective. Analyses indicated that most activity occurred in these stages as mothers made decisions and actions to leave. While abusers remained psychologically absent in the middle stages of change, mothers responded differently than they had in precontemplation. Their responses elicited new types and indicators of boundary ambiguity in the middle stages of change. In contemplation and preparation, Type II boundary ambiguity emerged as mothers psychologically disengaged from their partners while remaining physically in their relationships (see Table 3). Conversely, in action, Type I boundary ambiguity emerged as mothers’ psychological connection to their partners resurfaced after they had physically left their relationships. Throughout the middle stages of change, mothers appeared to have an “in/out”
relationship status (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998, p. 743), in which they were neither completely in nor completely out of their relationships. This section begins with a brief description of each stage, followed by the respective types and indicators of boundary ambiguity. The various cognitive and behavioral processes of change that mothers used to move across these stages are also reported (see Table 1 for a description of the processes of change).

**Being “In/Out”: Mothers’ Psychological Absence in Contemplation and Preparation**

Contemplation is the stage where all mothers began to define the abuse as a problem in the relationship. Mothers reached a turning point of realization (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007) in which they could no longer deny abusers’ psychological absence as a partner and father. They responded to this realization by using cognitive (e.g., consciousness raising) and behavioral (e.g., helping relationships) processes of change to make sense of their loss and contemplate leaving.

While contemplation is the stage in which mothers began thinking about leaving, preparation is the stage where some mothers began taking active steps to plan for leaving. No participants were in preparation at the time of the interview; thus, mothers provided retrospective accounts of this stage. Preparation was unique because it was the only stage that did not appear necessary for mothers to leave their partners. Only 14 mothers prepared to leave while the remaining 11 skipped preparation and leaped directly from contemplation into the stage of action. Of the 14 who prepared, preparation strategies included saving money, finding a job, packing essentials (e.g., clothes, credit cards), finding alternative living arrangements (e.g., leasing an apartment, contacting a shelter), and making an escape plan. Compared to mothers who skipped preparation, mothers who prepared were mostly White ($n = 8$ or 57% vs. $n = 3$ or 27%), employed during the relationship ($n = 12$ or 86% vs. 5 or 36%), and had older children at the time of their most recent separation ($M$ age of oldest or solo child = 5 vs. 1). In most cases,
mothers skipped preparation because they had no opportunity to plan for leaving. Rather, they were pushed into action after a crisis situation or when they became tired of the abuse. As Andrea (maintenance) recalled, “There was no pre-planning or anything. . . . No, it was always just like, ‘Enough, I’m done.’” Despite demographic differences in terms of planning, mothers did not differ in their perceptions of boundary ambiguity in contemplation and preparation.

In contemplation and preparation, mothers responded to abusers’ psychological absence by psychologically disengaging themselves while remaining physically present in the relationship, which created Type II boundary ambiguity. Several cognitive and behavioral processes of change enabled mothers’ psychological absence (see Table 1). First, they utilized the process of consciousness raising in both contemplation and preparation to seek more information that helped them better understand their partners’ psychological absence. Second, mothers used helping relationships (e.g., family, friends) and the media (e.g., self-help books), which entailed trusting, accepting and using the support of caring others to make changes (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). These relationships validated mothers’ definition of abusers’ psychological absence as a problem. For example, Bianca (maintenance) shared retrospective experiences of her grandmother’s role in offering validation:

Sometimes in my mind, I have these thoughts [like,] “Is this really happening? Am I getting crazy?” And my grandmother [would] say, “No, it is happening. I hear this.” So it was really informing for me because it showed that you don’t really know how much is reality and how much is not. . . . That helped me that she was there.

Consistent with Campbell et al.’s (1998) sample of women defined as “in/out,” mothers in contemplation and preparation held expectations that they would eventually leave even though they were still physically in the relationship. These mothers were not as committed to making their relationship work as they once were in precontemplation. Next, I discuss the indicators of mothers’ psychological absence while physically “in” the relationship.
Indicators of Mothers’ Psychological Absence

Two indicators of mothers’ psychological absence in contemplation and preparation were identified: mothers’ emotional leave-taking and shifting perceptions.

*Mothers’ emotional leave-taking.* Mothers’ emotional leave-taking in contemplation and preparation is consistent with Boss’ (2007) notion of saying “goodbye without leaving” (p. 105) in other Type II boundary ambiguity situations. As mothers accepted their psychological loss and abusers’ psychological absence as a partner and father, their feelings of love and care for abusers declined and they themselves began to psychologically disconnect from the relationship. Mothers utilized more processes of change that facilitated these changes (see Table 1). First, using the cognitive process of self-reevaluation, mothers engaged in the emotional and cognitive reappraising of their situation (Burke et al., 2004) and of their feelings towards their partners. Here, initial feelings of love were replaced by indifference or anger. For example, mothers talked about no longer wanting to be with their partners, as evidenced by statements such as, “I didn’t want him anymore,” and “In my heart I didn’t want to be there.” Similarly, mothers talked about having “emotionally captured the idea” of leaving while physically in the relationship. As Elena (contemplation) currently surmised, “I don’t feel any attachment [to him] now. I feel like I can let go of him and his family.” In most cases (*n* =23), these changes occurred over multiple separations. Mothers left and returned with renewed understanding of their partners’ behaviors, as in Elena’s case:

I keep thinking things are gonna get better between us two but they never do. [He] will never change. I don’t think he understands a family dynamic of having children, and someone who loves him and supports his job and supports him. . . . I understand that more now than ever [after having left and returned multiple times].
In addition to emotional leave-taking, the second indicator of mothers’ psychological absence (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity) was their shifting perceptions in contemplation and preparation.

*Mothers’ shifting perceptions.* Narratives showed mothers’ perceptions began shifting from wanting to stay in the relationship to trying to leave. Here, information gathered through the processes of consciousness raising and helping relationships helped mothers weigh the costs and benefits of staying versus leaving the relationship (i.e., the construct of decisional balance). In addition, mothers utilized the cognitive process of environmental reevaluation to assess how abusers’ problem behavior affected their environment. Specifically, environmental reevaluation emerged when mothers observed direct and indirect effects of the abuse and abusers’ psychological absence on the family. For example, mothers began to recognize how the abuse had affected them as mothers. Bella (maintenance) remembered:

> A lot of the time, I’d put the anger from the relationship [aside] and that wasn’t good. The kids would say, “Mom, can we go here?” I’d say, “No.” “Can we go here?” “No.” [So] we’d just stay in the house a lot of the times. It wasn’t good for them because they couldn’t be little child[ren] and enjoy their life. . . . [I realized] I [couldn’t] put my kids in this situation [anymore] as far as with the trauma. . . . These kids shouldn’t have to see me crying all of the time.

While Bella’s quote reflected perceptual shifts with regards to children’s wellbeing, Clara (maintenance) described retrospectively how her perceptions shifted in terms of her own safety. She described her perceptual shift from “not wanting to die” to “wanting to live”:

> Instead of just not wanting to be beat up or die or get hurt, you have to start changing the way you think, you have to start thinking about wanting to live. Because when you start wanting to live, you start taking steps that people do to live. Because just not wanting to die makes you walk around in fear all the time. But when you want to live, you start putting things in order, getting things in place and it has to happen in your head first. And I think that’s the thing, is once you realize you want to live, you start thinking of all the stuff you can do. . . . The transition is hard, but you can actually do it.
Shifting perceptions were also illustrated in mothers’ talk about changing their priorities. Specifically, mothers’ priorities changed as they engaged in environmental reevaluation. Narratives revealed the transition from prioritizing the preservation of the family unit in precontemplation to prioritizing their own and their children’s safety and wellbeing in the middle stages of change. As Jenny (maintenance) surmised, “It scared me as far as what [my son] would become watching how out of hand his father had become. I didn’t want [him] to follow in the same patterns.” Similarly, Elena (contemplation) used to believe that “it [was] more important for [my daughter] to see her father than it [was] for me to be safe.” However, at the time of the interview, Elena’s priorities had shifted as she contemplated leaving:

I think a child needs both parents [and] I always consider [my daughter] a factor in not leaving because I always wanted her to have [a] father in her life. . . . But I forgot that if [her father] is not a family-oriented individual, if he comes from a dysfunctional family and [if] he chooses not to hold onto relationships that are of value, . . . you know what, all I’m doing is teaching [my daughter] that it’s okay to do what [her father] is doing. I figured that out and I think that’s why I protect myself in saying, “I’m going to leave.” I think I’m going to have set their relationship on the back burner because I have to be strong to leave and make her life better in doing so.

While environmental reevaluation played a role in mothers’ shifting perceptions in contemplation and preparation, the behavioral process of self-liberation helped mothers choose and commit to leaving (Burke et al., 2004). Mothers’ commitment to leaving itself was indicative of their psychological absence from the relationship; for example, they talked about reaching a point where they had “had enough” or were “done” with the relationship. Elena’s (contemplation) present family diagram (see Figure 7) reflected self-liberation by depicting her expectation of the relationship ending (i.e., the “in/out” relationship status; Campbell et al., 1998). Although Elena’s diagram included the abuser, indicating that he was a part of the family, he was positioned away from her and her daughter. Thus, the family diagram suggested a boundary forming that separated Elena and her daughter from the abuser, a notion which was
further supported by her narrative. For example, she shared her current plans to relocate to another state with her daughter, indicating she was psychologically disconnecting from her partner and was on her way out of contemplation into preparation.

To summarize, mothers changed how they responded to abusers’ psychological absence in the middle stages of change. Instead of responding with denial and ambivalence as they did in precontemplation, mothers began to define the abuse and abusers’ psychological absence as a problem and contemplate leaving. As a result, mothers psychologically disconnected from the abuser, creating a Type II boundary ambiguity situation in which they were physically present but psychologically absent from the relationship (i.e., being “in/out”). Mothers’ emotional leave-taking and shifting perceptions were indicators of their psychological absence. In the following section, I describe the type and indicators of boundary ambiguity in the stage of action.

*Being “In/Out”: Mothers’ Psychological Presence in Action*

Action was the stage in which mothers had physically left the relationship (Brown, 1997). While all 25 mothers had left at some point in the relationship, only five were coded as being in action at the time of the interview. Fifteen mothers left with their children each time and ten left without their children in at least one separation from the abuser. Mothers’ perceptions of abusers’ psychological presence as a father were central to their decisions to leave with or without their children. Specifically, most mothers who left their children behind (*n* = 7) perceived abusers to be physically and psychologically present as fathers. Thus, these mothers left with the confidence that their children would be safe in their fathers’ care.

After leaving, mothers faced a new boundary ambiguity situation in which they once again felt psychologically connected to their former partners but were now physically “out” of the relationship. Boss (2007) referred to this Type I boundary ambiguity as “leaving without
saying goodbye” (p. 105). Consistent with Campbell et al.’s (1998) description of women who were “in/out” of their relationships, these mothers held expectations for their relationships to continue even though they were physically separated. Narratives revealed two indicators of mothers’ psychological presence in action: mothers’ lingering psychological connections to the abuser and difficulties in adjusting from “we” to “I.” Both influenced mothers’ return to the abuser (i.e., relapse).

**Indicators of Mothers’ Psychological Presence**

*Lingering psychological connection to the abuser.* All mothers reported some degree of psychological connection to their partners after physically leaving the relationship. For example, although they identified “good things” about being separated (e.g., the abuse stopped), they also noted “bad things,” such as having continued love for their partners and feeling “lonely.” As a result, ambivalence reemerged in action as mothers used decisional balance to consider whether to stay separated versus return to their partners. Most mothers felt ambivalent quickly after leaving as they second-guessed their decisions (e.g., questioning if they had done everything to make the relationship work). One example was Kerry (action), who at the time of the interview had only recently left her partner. She considered her partner to be a part of her life but “only in my mind because I haven’t seen him [nor] heard from him.” She struggled with the physical separation and her feelings of ambivalence:

> I’m [feeling] kind of in-between [about leaving him]. I know in the long run I did a good thing [by leaving], but at the same time, I miss him so much. . . . [So I feel] lukewarm; I kind of feel bad about leaving, but not so bad that I want to go back to him. And I feel good about being here (at the shelter), but not so good that I don’t miss him.

Despite being physically separated, Andrea (maintenance) had also once again felt a psychological connection to the abuser when she was in action:
There was nobody else that I felt intimately about except for him. Whether he’s called me a whore like a billion times, that’s the only person I thought of. I missed him. I wanted him to be there. I wanted to look at him because I had actually fallen head over heels for him, regardless of all the creepy, crazy, mean things. For some reason, it was like I needed to be with him.

Mothers’ lingering psychological connection while being physically separated was reflected in their family diagrams. An example is Sophie’s (action) present family diagram (see Figure 8). Her physical departure from the relationship had formed a boundary separating her and her son from the abuser. However, a link remained between Sophie and the abuser. Indeed, Sophie acknowledged having feelings for her partner: “I tend to believe in agape. I tend to love everyone to a point. I don’t hate him . . . [and] I want the best for him.” Further, she described her current status as being “on my way out,” rather than completely out, of the relationship.

**Difficulty adjusting from “we” to “I.”** The second indicator of mothers’ psychological presence in action was their difficulty adjusting to being single. Similar to the Type I boundary ambiguity perceived by spouses of Alzheimer’s patients (Kaplan, 2001), the task of adjusting from “we” to “I” involved mothers’ reconstructing their identities from partnered to single. Three factors complicated this task. First, mothers faced challenges in taking on the multiple roles and tasks (e.g., financial provider) once assumed by or shared with their partners. For example, unemployed or financially dependent mothers suddenly became sole breadwinners after leaving. As Ayanna (maintenance) noted, the one bad thing about being separated was “having to pay the bills on my own and having to do everything by myself. . . . That was an adjustment.”

Second, adjusting from “we” to “I” was complicated by having children. Most mothers reported that at least one child had missed his or her father and wanted to return home. As Shana (maintenance) recalled of her experiences in action, “[The worst part about being separated was] my kids [having to] go through these emotions. They can’t figure out why mommy and daddy
can’t stay together.” To support children’s connections to their fathers, 13 mothers reported staying in contact with the abusers (e.g., phone calls, in-person visits) after leaving. These points of contact kept abusers physically present in mothers’ lives and contributed to perceptions of boundary ambiguity. As Anna (precontemplation) explained:

I remember when we were separated (in action) . . . every so often he would come over and see [our daughter]. . . . [Once] we were spending Christmas at my parents’ [and] he was being very affectionate with me. He held my hand and he was playing with my hair at one point, which he never does [even] when we’re together. . . . [A few months later,] he started spending more time [with us] because [our daughter] was sick . . . and then he started spending the night [in my house].

In several cases, children’s lingering psychological connections to their fathers prompted mothers to return to their partners. For example, after moving out with her children, Bianca (maintenance) recalled how her son “was crying and crying, ‘I want my daddy! I miss my daddy!’ . . . It [broke] my heart. . . . That made me come back [to him].”

Third, mothers faced difficulty in the task of reclaiming self (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995), which is a process of reestablishing mothers’ identities before their relationships began. Particularly in intimate terrorism cases, in which abusers controlled and monitored their partners, mothers reported a diminished sense of self after leaving. Kerry (action) equated the experience to being “brainwashed” while Sophie (action) described it as having to “emotionally . . . put myself in a box.” Consequently, these mothers had difficulty perceiving themselves as having agency and being the person that they were before their relationships began. Kerry shared:

I felt like we were destined to be together. I felt like we were both just so miserable when we weren’t together that we couldn’t live without each other. [So] we were going to try to fight to be together because that’s the way God intended it to be. . . . It was kind of like, I couldn’t live without him.

Only when mothers perceived themselves as being a separate entity from their relationships (which in most cases occurred in maintenance), were they able to fully adjust from “we” to “I.”
To sum, when mothers left in action, Type I boundary ambiguity emerged as they reestablished a psychological connection to their former partners despite being physically separated. Two indicators of mothers’ psychological presence included mothers’ lingering psychological attachment to the abusers and difficulty adjusting from “we” to “I.” Together, these factors kept abusers present in mothers’ lives and often prompted relapses into earlier stages of change. Upon relapse, however, mothers once again became physically present but psychologically absent from the relationship as the abuse continued. This cycle of being in and out of the relationship kept mothers stuck in limbo in the middle stages of change.

**Stuck in Limbo in the Middle Stages of Change: Fluctuating Between Being In and Out**

Figure 9 illustrates mothers’ being stuck in limbo as they moved between being physically present but psychologically absent in contemplation and preparation (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity) and being physically absent but psychologically present in action (i.e., Type I boundary ambiguity). These fluctuating presences and absences were evident in the narratives of the 23 mothers who experienced multiple separations. Cognitively, these mothers were neither committed to staying in the relationship nor committed to leaving. Unable to move on, this process was stressful and confusing for mothers, as Andrea (maintenance) recalled:

> For a while, [our relationship] just continuously stayed the same. It was just like all over the place. . . . I wouldn’t say things got better or worse. I’d say it just stayed as unstable or [as] stable as it could be. . . . And [then] in the end, I just always felt crazy, like I was going nuts.

While mothers fluctuated between being in and out, abusers contributed to these fluctuations by keeping mothers in limbo with their remedial work. Abusers utilized remedial work in response to mothers’ contemplating and taking action to leave. Similar to the stage of precontemplation, abusers once again used remedial work to reestablish a temporary and false sense of boundary clarity in the relationship. Abusers established a temporary sense of boundary
clarity by becoming psychologically present as a partner and parent. In doing so, remedial work drew most mothers back into earlier stages of change, such as in Jillian’s (maintenance) case. Retrospectively, she explained:

[There were a few times when] I was like, “I got to get away from this.” I told him, “It’s over with. . . You go on back to your sister’s house and leave me alone.” So he would stay gone for a while . . . [but] then he’d come back [and say,] “I’m sorry. I’ll make up [to] you. . . I want to be a father to my kids. Let’s make this work.” . . . Then I’d let him back and gave it a good month to start back over again.

Jillian’s quote also illustrates abusers’ use of children in remedial work. When mothers left with their children, abusers persuaded mothers to return by claiming that the children needed their father or accusing mothers of “trying to keep my kids away from me so I can’t see them.” On the other hand, when mothers left without their children, abusers often persuaded mothers to return by claiming that the children needed their mother. In both scenarios, mothers felt compelled to return to their partners because of their children.

Although mothers’ fluctuating presences and absences and abusers’ remedial work kept mothers in limbo early on, they also helped mothers move out of limbo and into maintenance. Mimi (maintenance) explained:

[Leaving and returning] really pushed me further and further away [so] that I know I won’t go back. That’s what I think changed for me. [The process] just got better for me. I believe it did. It sounds blasé because I kept getting abused [after I returned] but it [made] me stronger [and] pushed him further away from me.

As mothers fluctuated between being in and out, they used consciousness raising to gain additional information and resources, increasing their confidence and readiness to leave (see Table 1). For example, over time, mothers were able to identify their partners’ remedial work as a “pattern that repeated itself [in the relationship]” rather than actual boundary clarity in the relationship. At the same time, mothers used dramatic relief to express their feelings about the abusers’ behaviors and social liberation to increase their awareness, availability and acceptance.
of an alternative violence-free lifestyle (Burke et al., 2004). Both of these processes of change are illustrated in mothers’ reports of reaching a point of being “done with” or “tired” of abusers’ behaviors.

To summarize, both mothers and abusers contributed to the types of boundary ambiguity found in the middle stages of change. In contemplation and preparation, mothers were psychologically absent while physically present in the relationship (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity). Indicators of their psychological absence included mothers’ emotional leave-taking and shifting perceptions. While the processes of self-reevaluation and environmental reevaluation enabled mothers’ psychological absence, the behavioral process of self-liberation helped them commit to leaving. However, after physically leaving in action, they once again felt psychologically connected to their partners (i.e., Type I boundary ambiguity). Indicators of mothers’ psychological presence included reports of lingering psychological attachment to the abusers and difficulty adjusting from “we” to “I.” Driven by abusers’ remedial work to create false and temporary boundary clarity, mothers fluctuated between being in and out of their relationships. While these fluctuations initially kept mothers in limbo, they eventually helped mothers leave permanently. Most mothers used consciousness raising, dramatic relief and self-liberation to gain more understanding of their partners’ remedial work, form negative views of these behaviors and increase their awareness of and desire for nonviolence. As remedial work became less effective over multiple separations, mothers gradually moved out of limbo into maintenance.

*Late Stage of Change: Maintenance*

At the time of the interview, 18 mothers were in maintenance and shared current experiences of being in maintenance. Consistent with the Stages of Change Model definition of
maintenance (Brown, 1997), these mothers had stayed separated from their abusive partners for at least six months without relapsing ($M = 7$ years). Twelve identified as single, four were separated from their abusers and in the process of divorce, and two were married to new partners. Fourteen mothers in maintenance reported a unique perception of boundary ambiguity, known as boundary intrusion, in which abusers were physically and/or psychologically present in mothers’ lives despite the relationship having ended (i.e., Type IV boundary ambiguity). Boundary intrusion was indicated by mothers’ perception of abusers’ presence in their lives as unwanted. Two types of boundary intrusion were reported: physical intrusion and nonphysical controlling intrusion. As mothers’ managed intrusion, they renegotiated family boundaries and achieved boundary clarity as either single parents or coparents with their former partners.

**Indicator of Boundary Intrusion: Mothers’ Perception of Abusers’ Presence as Unwanted**

In maintenance, perceptions of boundary intrusion (i.e., Type IV boundary ambiguity) emerged when an external factor (i.e., abusers) interacted with mothers’ internal family system (Lee, 1995) to interfere with mothers’ efforts to maintain separation and remain safe. An indicator of boundary intrusion was mothers’ perception of abusers’ physical and psychological presence as unwanted. Mothers reported two types of boundary intrusion: physical intrusion and nonphysical controlling intrusion.

**Physical intrusion.** Physical intrusion included direct acts that abusers’ used to force their physical presence in mothers’ lives. Mothers reported a range of physically intrusive behaviors by their former partners, including drive-bys or unplanned visits to mothers’ homes, unwanted physical contact, stalking, verbal threats, home invasions, kidnapping and physical violence. Mimi (maintenance) shared a recent incident of physical intrusion:

[I] had noticed someone following [me] for the longest time but [I] didn’t think it would be [the abuser] because . . . I haven’t talked to him and we weren’t together [anymore].
I was getting out of the car . . . [when he] grabbed me at the back of my head, slammed my face up against the driver’s window and it busted. Then he dragged me all the way down the street and pulled [a big chunk of] my hair out . . . [After repeatedly stomping on me,] he spit on me and drove off.

According to these mothers, exchanging children for time with each parent presented opportunities for physical intrusion. For example, Jenny (maintenance) described her former partner’s physical intrusion that often occurred while exchanging their son, Nathan:

[My former partner] would come to the house to get Nathan and drop him off. Most of the times, he couldn’t stop himself from having something to say [to me]. Sometimes he would get out of hand . . . [and] go through periods of time where he . . . tells me what to do and when I need to do it, what’s wrong with me and Nathan. He doesn’t care if Nathan’s around . . . [So] Nathan has seen how much his dad has hurt me and how vicious he gets [during these exchanges].

Physical intrusion generally decreased or ceased over time, particularly under certain conditions. At the time of the interview, eight of the 14 abusers were reportedly incarcerated for various charges including domestic abuse (towards mothers or other partners), failure to pay child support, and other felonies (e.g., robbery). While some forms of physical intrusion (e.g., physical abuse) ceased with abusers’ incarceration, six mothers still experienced physical intrusion via phone calls, cards and letters.

Physical intrusion also decreased or ceased when abusers or mothers formed new relationships. Of the 14 cases with reported boundary intrusion, eight abusers and nine mothers had remained single after separation. When abusers formed new relationships, mothers reported that their intrusive behaviors decreased because abusers then targeted their new partners. For Ayanna (maintenance), her former partner’s intrusion stopped when he decided to “move on . . . to beat up somebody else.” When mothers entered new relationships, they believed physical intrusion decreased because abusers were deterred by mothers’ new partners. For example, when
Quinnell’s (maintenance) former partner discovered that she was dating again, he disappeared from the family’s life:

Once, the guy that I was actually dating made an appearance at my house. [The abuser was there and he] said, “Well, I’ve got to go.” He got up and . . . just walked out. . . . That was the last time I ever saw [him]. It was kind of crappy because he couldn’t get over our relationship to even see his own kids, which I think is childish. I think that’s the reason he dropped out though.

Nonphysical controlling intrusion. Twelve mothers in maintenance reported nonphysical controlling intrusion in addition to physical intrusion by their former partners. Nonphysical controlling intrusion includes abusers’ forced psychological presence in mothers’ lives by continuing to exert control over them, particularly in terms of custody and child support. For example, abusers reportedly tried to manipulate the legal system to work against mothers. One common tactic was reporting misinformation to discredit mothers in court, such as making false allegations of child abuse or false statements about mothers’ character. Forced to respond to abusers’ tactics, mothers participated in costly and time-consuming legal battles, as illustrated in Clara’s (maintenance) situation:

People [usually] get divorced for $300. I spent $17,500. He spent $34,900 dragging me to court . . . accusing me of vandalism and destroying of property. I’d have to show up in court [and] bring the time[sheets] and attendance [record] from my job to prove that I was at my job so I couldn’t have destroyed [his] car or whatever. [Once] he broke a window. . . . I don’t know how he did it, but he broke a window at [his] house. He took pictures of the window [and] sent that in, saying that I was destroying property. And [so] I go back to court again. . . . He said that [he] just [wanted] to make sure that I don’t have any money [left].

Abusers’ forced physical and psychological presence in maintenance contradicted mothers’ expectations that their relationships would end after separation and that they would regain control of their lives. Thus, in this sample, boundary intrusion hindered mothers’ plans to “move on” (e.g., having new relationships) and eventually “gain closure” after leaving. For
example, Daphne (maintenance) surmised how her former partner’s boundary intrusion held her back from establishing new relationships:

    I had a coworker . . . who . . . tried dating me last year. I tried to keep my distance from him because [the abuser] was appearing on my job and I couldn’t really have a relationship with anybody because he was calling me at work. People were aware of this and I kept telling people, “I don’t want to be in a relationship.” . . . [So] people would stay away from me and be like, “You’ve got issues you need to work through and you need to handle that first.”

To manage abusers’ boundary intrusion and achieve boundary clarity, mothers engaged in active strategies to resist intrusion and renegotiate their family boundaries. At the time of the interview, all mothers in maintenance perceived boundary clarity in their family relationships.

*Mothers’ Boundary Renegotiation and Boundary Clarity*

    Mothers used physical and cognitive strategies to renegotiate family boundaries between themselves and abusers as former partners (i.e., adjusting from “we” to “I”) and as parents (i.e., establishing parenting roles separate from former partner relationships). To adjust from “we” to “I,” mothers used the change processes of social liberation and counterconditioning. Through social liberation, mothers became committed to living a nonviolent lifestyle apart from their former partners. They talked about prioritizing themselves and their children over their former partners and seeing no possibility of reuniting, which reinforced a boundary between mothers and abusers. At the same time, they used counterconditioning to learn and practice alternative nonviolent lifestyles (Burke et al., 2004) to prevent returning to abusers, as shown in Valerie’s (maintenance) quote:

    I do not know of any reason why [there’s] the old “Oh I have to stay with him” bullshit. . . . [There are plenty of resources out there]. You can get Section 8 housing, you can get emergency food stamps, you can get emergency cash . . . you can get sent to school, you can get sent to training, they can pay for your daycare. . . . And the biggest [accomplishment] you will ever make is walking away from a man that abuses you.
Adjusting from “we” to “I” also involved changes in mothers’ social identity. Among married mothers, reverting to their maiden names symbolized regaining a sense of self in maintenance (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). As Shana (maintenance) declared, “After the divorce, I’m going back to my maiden name because when I was a Cutler, I didn’t deal with all that stuff (violence). . . . I’m not a Percy (abuser’s family name). I am going to go back to who I am.” Such changes helped to publicly clarify boundaries between mothers and their former partners.

Mothers also renegotiated boundaries between themselves and their former partners as parents. This process was clearly child-centered; although mothers and abusers were no longer partners, they were still parents. Seventeen mothers reported ongoing contact with abusers for the purposes of parenting; one mother relinquished custody of her children to the state and had no further contact with her former partner. Mothers renegotiated boundaries and achieved boundary clarity as either single parents (n = 7) or coparents (n = 10). “Single” and “coparent” refer to whether mothers parented with or without their former partners’ active involvement and not mothers’ relationship status.

*Boundary clarity as a single parent (n = 7).* Seven mothers achieved boundary clarity in maintenance as a single parent because abusers were completely absent as a father. All seven mothers had sole physical custody of the children. These mothers did not consider their former partners as a part of their family and thus did not include them in their family diagrams in maintenance. For example, Daphne’s (maintenance) diagram included only her, her children, and the family dog (see Figure 10), demonstrating her perception of boundary clarity as a single parent.
Abusers were absent as fathers for two reasons: mothers setting rigid boundaries to minimize intrusion and/or abusers choosing to be absent from their children’s lives. Six of the seven mothers reported setting rigid boundaries to minimize abusers’ physical and controlling intrusion. Mothers responded to abusers’ intrusion by reinforcing their boundaries (e.g., telling abusers to stay away), seeking protective orders and using third parties to prevent direct contact with abusers. These protective strategies also illustrated mothers’ use of stimulus control to actively avoid violence by limiting or ceasing contact with their former partners.

Single parents also expressed concerns for their children’s wellbeing. Specifically, they perceived that IPV diminished their former partners’ capacity to parent effectively and that continued father involvement would be more detrimental than beneficial to the children. Thus, they did not differentiate abusers’ behaviors as a partner from their potential as fathers (i.e., being an abusive partner meant being a bad father). Courtney (maintenance) explained:

[My children] were an absolute part of this. To me it was as though he did it (abuse) to them too. . . . [So] I think bringing [the abuser back] partly into [our family] would be very, very confusing . . . [and] traumatic for them. . . . It would be harmful for [them to have] the connection with their father.

Safety concerns were especially central in three cases in which fathers had allegedly abused their children. Suspicions of child abuse drove Maxine (maintenance) to set rigid boundaries and “[find] ways to keep him away from my kids” in maintenance. When her suspicions were confirmed, Maxine immediately ended contact between her former partner and the children:

I didn’t want him to be a part of their lives. I made that choice. If that was a good choice [or] a bad choice, it didn’t matter because I didn’t want to see those kids hurt again. . . . I called my ex-husband and I said, “My daughter just verified what I’ve been suspecting. So if I catch you near my children [again], I will castrate you, literally. . . . If I find out [that] you touched them . . . at any time, any way or form, I know where you live. And if the [legal system] doesn’t [hold you accountable], I will do something because you’re not going to destroy [my children], period.” And ever since that, I haven’t had [any] more problems from him as far as wanting to see the kids.
Four of the seven mothers (including three who set rigid boundaries) reported that abusers were absent as fathers because they chose not to be present in their children’s lives, a decision perceived by mothers as an act of retaliation against them for leaving. Clara’s (maintenance) quote illustrates this perception:

> Even if you’re mad at me or hate me, you don’t do [to] your own children the things he’s done to them, especially when they’re little boys and they don’t know what they’ve done to upset you so bad [to the point] where you don’t have anything to do with them. . . . Even if you’re angry, how do you go a year without contacting them, without sending them a birthday card [or] a Christmas gift, or at least just responding to their phone call?

*Boundary clarity as coparents (n = 10).* Ten mothers achieved boundary clarity in maintenance as coparents with their former partners. Eight of these mothers had sole physical custody of their children; two fathers had sole physical custody. As coparents, mothers perceived abusers as a part of their children’s family but not as a part of their own family. Making the distinction between children’s and mothers’ families appeared to be key in the process of gaining clarity between the former partner relationship and the father-child relationship. Mimi (maintenance) shared an example of currently making this distinction:

> When it comes [to] anything [such as] birthdays for [my daughter], we do them separately. She will have Christmas and Thanksgiving, any holidays, with “her” family. I don’t go [for them]; I just drop her off at her dad’s or her grandma’s, they’ll have their own [thing] and then we have ours. . . . That is what I separate. It’s better for me to do it that way. Therefore, I am really keeping him out of my life.

Bianca’s (maintenance) family diagram (see Figure 11) serves as an example of boundary clarity as coparents. As shown by the arrow in the diagram, a boundary wall separates Bianca’s family from the abuser, indicating boundary clarity between her family and the abuser. However, the abuser is still present in the family diagram as a father, as shown by the links drawn between the abuser and his children.
Mothers coparented for two reasons. Three of the 10 mothers reported feeling that they *had* to coparent with their former partners. Mothers such as Ayanna coparented only because they believed that “it is more or less against the law” to deny abusers’ presence in their children’s lives. For these mothers, coparenting reflected an involuntary response to the legal system and was perceived as intrusive, rather than their own desire to coparent. Similar to the single parents in maintenance, these three mothers deemed father involvement to be unimportant.

Andrea (maintenance) shared her current perception of father involvement:

> I just don’t think all that highly of father figures. . . . I’ve never had a really good father figure to go by. So I think they’re usually useless and not needed. But I obviously don’t tell my son that because he sees [his father] as “Oh [he’s] my dad!”

The other seven mothers *wanted* their former partners to be present as fathers. Unlike those who achieved boundary clarity as single parents, these 7 mothers differentiated abusers’ roles as a partner versus a father. In other words, they did not equate being an abusive partner with being an incapable father. Five mothers who coparented (compared to none of the single parents) deemed father involvement as important and hoped for ongoing father-child relationships.

Indeed, Valerie’s (maintenance) quote illustrates a sharp contrast to Andrea’s perception of father involvement:

> I would never say I didn’t want him to have a relationship with [the children]. My dad died when I was 13 and I am glad I had those 13 years with him . . . [even though he] wasn’t perfect. I think kids need a dad . . . [and so] I would never deny him [as a father]. . . . I don’t think I could ever say they can never see him again.

Similar to single mothers, all 10 mothers who coparented with their former partners reported current concerns about their own safety. Thus they also utilized stimulus control to actively avoid violence by limiting or ceasing contact with their former partners. For example, five coparents used third parties (e.g., relatives, friends, abusers’ new partners) to help manage coparenting. Although most coparents (*n* = 8) did not report safety concerns for their children,
they still engaged in strategies to keep children safe during unsupervised visits with their fathers. For example, mothers equipped children with cell phones and practiced emergency safety plans with their children. Coparents also indicated that, if children’s safety was ever threatened, they would no longer coparent with their former partners. As Shana (maintenance) maintained:

> He’s never done [anything] harmful to the kids that I know of. [But] as soon as [my children] come home one day and tell me [something is wrong], that will be the last day he sees his kids without being supervised because I’m not going to [stand for] my kids . . . seeing him beat up one of his girlfriends or anything like that. If you keep your hands off people long enough to see your kids, you are good to go. If not, uh-uh *(indicating no)*.

In sum, mothers perceived boundary intrusion (i.e., Type IV boundary ambiguity) in maintenance as abusers forced their physical and/or psychological presence in mothers’ lives after separation. An indicator of boundary intrusion was mothers’ perception of abusers’ presence as unwanted. Boundary intrusion interfered with mothers’ efforts to move on with their lives. In response to abusers’ physical and nonphysical controlling intrusion, mothers used social liberation and counterconditioning to renegotiate family boundaries between themselves and the abusers as former partners (i.e., adjusting from “we” to “I”) and as parents (i.e., establishing parenting roles separate from former partner relationships). Boundary renegotiation was necessary to achieve boundary clarity (i.e., perceiving abusers as no longer a part of their family). Currently, mothers achieved boundary clarity as single parents or coparents with their former partners. For single mothers, abusers were not involved with their children (i.e., they were absent fathers). For mothers who coparented, abusers were involved in children’s lives. Coparents perceived abusers to be a part of their children’s family but not theirs. Both single mothers and coparents utilized the process of stimulus control to reinforce boundaries and minimize abusers’ intrusion.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to integrate boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model to better explain women’s process of leaving abusive partners. This integration addresses current limitations of the Stages of Change Model by exploring the process of leaving beyond individual change and within a complex relational context (Frasier et al., 2001). Various types and indicators (or evidence) of boundary ambiguity were reported in each stage of change, suggesting that leaving is a systemic, fluid and nonlinear process as mothers seek to gain boundary clarity over time. Depending on the stage of change, boundary ambiguity emerged either as a perceptual barrier or a facilitator of change. Cognitive and behavioral processes of change were used to facilitate the process of leaving by helping mothers clarify boundaries and increase self-efficacy. For mothers in this study, the task of achieving boundary clarity extended well beyond physical separation from their abusive partners.

Leaving an Abusive Partner as a Systemic, Fluid and Nonlinear Process

Leaving as a Systemic Process

While stage models, such as the Stages of Change Model, are helpful frameworks for understanding relational phenomena, they often are simplistic and parsimonious with limited ability to reflect complex processes (Rollie & Duck, 2006). The current study, like many others (e.g., Burke et al., 2009), demonstrates that any exploration of the process of leaving an abusive partner using the Stages of Change Model must consider the relational context within which this process occurs; failure to do so obscures the complexity of the process. For example, while mothers in the current study were moving in and out of their relationships in the middle stages of change (i.e., being in limbo), abusers appeared to be influencing women’s decisions with their own fluctuating absences and presences (e.g., through the use of remedial work). At the same
time, mothers’ decisions to leave or return were clearly influenced by their children (e.g., leaving when concerned about children’s safety; returning when children missed their fathers). These interaction patterns suggest that leaving an abusive partner is a systemic process as mothers respond to the sense of loss and change in their families (Boss, 1992).

*Leaving as a Fluid Process*

The integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model also highlights the fluidity of the process of leaving an abusive partner. Results from this study support a growing body of literature that has identified leaving an abusive partner as a fluid and dynamic process involving multiple “ins” and “outs” (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Campbell et al., 1998). This study extends the work of Campbell et al. (1998) who first showed how women’s relationship status is fluid over time as they engage in the process of leaving. Interviews with abused women at three different time points over 2.5 years revealed that while some women were clearly still in their abusive relationships and some were clearly out, many did not quite fit in this dichotomy. Rather, as Campbell and her colleagues reported, many of these women were in an intermediate “in/out” status, in which they either had expectations for the relationship to end while they were with their abusers (consistent with mothers in contemplation) or had expectations for the relationship to continue while separated from their abusers (consistent with mothers in action). Thus, the process of leaving seems to involve a complex transition from being completely in to “in/out” to being completely out of the relationship.

In boundary ambiguity terms, the process of leaving in the current study appeared to be a transition from perceiving boundary clarity (in precontemplation), then boundary ambiguity (in the middle stages of change), and then boundary clarity again with renegotiated family boundaries (in maintenance). This transitional pattern supports Boss’ (2002) claim that boundary
ambiguity tends to be higher when family systems are in transition. Differences in perceptions of boundaries were evident when comparing mothers’ family diagrams at different stages of change. Specifically, mothers who were “in” (e.g., Anna, precontemplation; see Figure 6) or “out” of their relationships (e.g., Daphne, maintenance; see Figure 10) drew diagrams with more certainty about who was in and out of their families than did “in/out” mothers whose boundaries were less clear (e.g., Sophie, action; see Figure 8). Importantly, research has shown that prolonged boundary ambiguity blocks cognitive coping (Boss, 1993) and increases individual and family dysfunction (Boss, 2002). Similarly, Bell et al. (2007) reported that “in/out” women felt worse about their current lives and family situations compared to those who were either completely in or completely out of their relationships. Consistent with these prior findings, “in/out” mothers like Sophie (action) who perceived high boundary ambiguity appeared to have more difficulty coping with and making decisions about their situation, compared to mothers like Anna (precontemplation) or Bianca (maintenance) who perceived themselves to be completely in or out of their relationships.

Leaving as a Nonlinear Process

Although two mothers reported a relatively linear progression through the stages of change with no relapses, their experiences were not typical of the sample. Twenty-three mothers who experienced multiple separations reported a nonlinear process of leaving that involved relapses into earlier stages, leapfrogging over stages (Chang et al., 2006), and backing and forthing between stages (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Indeed, mothers’ experiences in the current study seemed to fit the three trajectories of leaving delineated in my Master’s thesis research (Khaw & Hardesty; see Figure 12). Specifically, the two mothers in the current study who maintained one permanent separation fit the continuous linear model (Khaw & Hardesty), in
which leaving occurred in the order of the stages of change without relapse. The remaining 23 mothers followed one or both of the nonlinear trajectories shown in Figure 12. In the discontinuous cyclical model, leaving is a linear process until the stage of action where relapse occurs more than once, forming a cycle of “backing and forthing” (Khaw & Hardesty, p. 418). In the discontinuous leaping model, leaving involves skipping the preparation stage and moving directly from contemplation into action, which has also been called “leapfrogging” (Chang et al., 2006). Thus, the majority of the mothers in the current sample experienced leaving as a nonlinear process.

According to the developmental literature, a continuous (or linear) model indicates predictability and stability, whereas a discontinuous (or nonlinear) model indicates unpredictability and change in structures, purpose, or meanings (Lerner, 1986). As depicted in Figure 12, discontinuous patterns of nonlinearity emerged primarily from the activities occurring in the middle stages of change, which, as the current study found, were stages in which most mothers got stuck in limbo. Being in limbo involved fluctuating between being psychologically absent but physically present in contemplation and preparation and being psychologically present but physically absent in action over multiple separations (see Figure 9). According to Boss (2006), relationship exits and entries are inherently stressful and unstable situations that can produce and/or heighten perceptions of boundary ambiguity in families. Indeed, boundary ambiguity appeared to be heightened for mothers in the current study who experienced being in limbo due to multiple relationship exits and (re)entries in the middle stages. Perhaps perceptions of boundary clarity facilitate continuous linear trajectories of leaving whereas perceptions of boundary ambiguity contribute to more complex patterns (e.g., by serving as a barrier to maintaining separation). On the other hand, continuous linear trajectories may facilitate
perceptions of clear boundaries while backing and forthing and leapfrogging perpetuate boundary ambiguity.

Chaos theory (Weigel & Murray, 2000) may also offer some insight into the development of complex nonlinear trajectories of leaving. Although originally theorized in the physical and biological sciences, chaos theory has recently gained more popularity in understanding the development and change in romantic relationships. A key component of chaos theory is that processes that evolve over time (e.g., the process of leaving) are nonlinear dynamic systems that can fluctuate between different stages or states, making it difficult to predict change or outcomes. The process of fluctuating from one stage to another is known as a phase shift, which frequently occurs during times of transition in which relationships take on new meanings and functions (Trickett & Buchanan, 1997). The process of leaving involves multiple phase shifts. For example, in the current study, fluctuations in mothers’ relationship status from being in to “in/out” to out mark a fluid change in their perceptions of their abusive partners and their relationships. Such parallels to chaos theory suggest the paradoxical nature of leaving an abusive partner in that the process is simultaneously predictable yet unpredictable (hence, “chaotic”).

This notion supports what researchers have already documented about the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model – that abused women do leave using the five stages of change but do not always leave in the same, predictable manner (e.g., in the order of the stages; Brown, 1999; Chang et al., 2006, Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Chaos theory posits that this variability is normal rather than abnormal in relationships (Weigel & Murray, 2000). The current study suggests that the dual influence of boundary ambiguity as both a barrier and facilitator may be an important factor underlying the variability in women’s process of leaving.
The Dual Influence of Boundary Ambiguity in the Process of Leaving

Results from the current study suggest that boundary ambiguity is both a cognitive barrier to and facilitator of change for women leaving abusive partners. This dual influence of boundary ambiguity suggests a departure from existing conceptualizations of boundary ambiguity as only a barrier, not a facilitator (e.g., Boss, 2002; 2006; Kaplan, 2001; Peterson & Christensen, 2002). As shown in Table 3, various types and indicators of boundary ambiguity emerged throughout the stages of change; however, whether boundary ambiguity served as a barrier or facilitator depended on mothers’ commitment to stay or leave within a particular stage. In the current study, boundary ambiguity appeared to be a cognitive barrier to leaving when mothers were highly committed to preserving their relationships and, thus, responded in ways that prevented change. In contrast, boundary ambiguity appeared to facilitate change when mothers were highly committed to preserving safety and, thus, responded in ways that promoted change.

**Boundary Ambiguity as a Cognitive Barrier**

In precontemplation, boundary ambiguity emerged when abusers were physically present but had become psychologically absent as a partner and father (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity). Because mothers in precontemplation had not defined their situations as abusive and were not yet ready to contemplate change, they responded to abusers’ psychological absence with denial and ambivalence. Both are classic initial responses to boundary ambiguity that block cognitive coping (Boss, 2004). In this study, most mothers left and then returned to precontemplation, illustrating their process of adapting to the situation. Adapting appears similar to the processes of “enduring” (Landenburger, 1989) and “being in” (Moss et al., 1997), which illustrate women’s use of denial mechanisms to tolerate the abusive relationship. Similarly, ambivalence was salient among the 12 mothers who perceived abusers as psychologically absent
partners but psychologically present fathers (i.e., abusers were evaluated negatively as a partner but positively as a father). Despite the abuse, these mothers were committed to preserving father-child relationships. Because mothers in precontemplation were committed to preserving their family relationships, their perception of boundary ambiguity resulting from abusers’ psychological absence elicited cognitive responses (e.g., denial) that deterred them from leaving.

Boundary ambiguity also appeared to be a cognitive barrier to maintaining separation in the stage of action. Here, physically separated mothers were the sources of boundary ambiguity as they reestablished a psychological connection to their abusive partners (i.e. Type I boundary ambiguity). Once separated, they faced ambivalent feelings about going through with the separation process, having left “without saying goodbye” (Boss, 2007, p. 105). Several studies identify psychological connection as the most common reason women give for returning to their abusive partners (e.g., Griffing et al., 2002). Mothers may be motivated to return to their abusive partners to reduce boundary ambiguity (i.e., achieve boundary clarity) by once again being physically and psychologically “in” the relationship. Thus, in such cases of relapse, boundary ambiguity may serve as a barrier to change.

The reemergence of a psychological connection in action is also indicative of mothers’ challenges in adjusting from “we” to “I” and gaining boundary clarity after separation. Mothers in action may experience a sense of loss, specifically a loss of status (Hagestad & Smyer, 1982). Having adopted the role of a wife or girlfriend can become central to one’s sense of self; thus, when mothers physically leave their partners, they may feel that they have “lost a part of themselves” (Rollie & Duck, 2006) and face difficulty in the task of “reclaiming self” (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995). Mothers in the current study may have felt that the only way to reclaim their status and sense of self was to return to the relationship and become a “we” again. Here,
ongoing commitments to preserve the relationship may have enabled the reemergence of mothers’ psychological connection to their abusive partners after physically leaving in action. As a result, mothers may be compelled to move back into the relationship to achieve boundary clarity (i.e., by being both physically and psychologically present in the relationship).

**Boundary Ambiguity as a Facilitator of Change**

While serving as a barrier to change in precontemplation and action, boundary ambiguity appeared to facilitate change in contemplation and preparation when mothers were psychologically absent but physically present (i.e., Type II boundary ambiguity). In the current study, emotional leave-taking was an important process that facilitated change for mothers. Similar to “goodbye without leaving” (Boss, 2007, p. 105), emotional leave-taking or “mentally leaving” before physically leaving has been reported to be a crucial step in women’s process of change (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995). Emotional leave-taking is similar to an emotional divorce, which Bohannan (1968) identified as the first step towards dissolving a romantic relationship. In an emotional divorce, “individuals become ambivalent toward each other and grow apart psychologically, socially and emotionally” (Rollie & Duck, 2006, p. 225). Baly (2010) reported a similar finding that abused women go through “an active process of withdrawal and reevaluation as they attempt to come to terms with the contradictions and dilemmas of their situation” (p.11). According to Baly, this process was crucial for abused women to conserve and build up the strength to physically leave.

Mothers’ shifting priorities from preserving family relationships to maintaining safety appeared to enable emotional leave-taking. Other studies (e.g., Zink, Elder, & Jacobson, 2003) have observed similar shifts in women’s priorities, suggesting that safety becomes increasingly central to mothers’ decision-making once they move out of precontemplation. Shifting priorities
helped mothers commit to their decisions to leave. Studies have found that commitment to leave reflects high levels of self-efficacy or confidence to leave (Burke et al., 2004) and has been significantly related to women’s intentions (Byrne & Arias, 2006) and decisions to leave (Strube & Barbour, 1983). Thus, in the current study, shifting priorities enabled mothers’ emotional leave-taking (creating Type II boundary ambiguity), which in turn facilitated their movement into action to achieve boundary clarity (i.e., by physically separating).

The dual influence of boundary ambiguity as a barrier to and facilitator of change is apparent from this study. As a barrier, boundary ambiguity seemed to elicit responses from mothers that blocked cognitive coping in precontemplation and efforts to maintain separation in action. Thus, mothers sought to achieve boundary clarity by staying in or returning to the relationship. As a facilitator, boundary ambiguity seemed to enable movement into action from contemplation and preparation, as mothers sought to achieve boundary clarity separate from their partners. The processes of change appeared central in facilitating change.

The Processes of Change and Boundary Clarity

Results from this study illustrate mothers’ use of cognitive and behavioral processes to facilitate change by helping them clarify boundaries and increase self-efficacy. Mothers used nine of 10 processes of change (five cognitive and four behavioral) to move from one stage to another. The behavioral process of reinforcement management, or the process of “rewarding oneself or being rewarded for making changes” (Burke et al., 2004, p. 125) was not found in this study, nor was it evident in Burke and colleagues’ study. Perhaps, unlike other behavioral changes (e.g., smoking cessation), mothers did not perceive any tangible “rewards” for leaving an abusive partner other than having left itself. That mothers used nine out of 10 processes of change throughout their process of leaving highlights their active efforts to resist, cope with, and
respond to IPV in all stages of change – including precontemplation, in which they had not yet defined the abuse as a problem. These results are consistent with survivor theory, which views abused women as active agents rather than helpless victims (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). In addition, mothers’ use of the processes of change resonates with Boss’ (2007) core assumption of a “natural resiliency” (p. 107) existing in families with boundary ambiguity. Perhaps the processes of change represent mothers’ strategies to preserve that resiliency throughout the process of leaving.

Most processes of change were utilized in the middle stages of change, in which mothers fluctuated from being psychologically absent but physically present in contemplation and preparation to being psychologically present but physically absent in action (i.e. being in limbo). The increased use of the processes of change in the middle stages suggests that they may be important for managing heightened boundary ambiguity and ultimately achieving boundary clarity. For example, cognitive processes of change (e.g., self-reevaluation) were salient in facilitating the process of emotional leave-taking in contemplation and preparation. On the other hand, when mothers were physically separated from their abusive partners in action and maintenance, they utilized more behavioral processes of change (e.g. self-liberation) to overcome challenges in adjusting from “we” to “I.” Similar to findings reported by Burke et al. (2004), these patterns suggest the significance of cognitive processes in helping mothers to psychologically disengage from the relationship (in earlier stages of change) and behavioral processes in helping them to physically leave and sustain separation (in later stages of change). It is also possible that some mothers experience difficulty shifting from cognitive to behavioral processes of change (i.e., shifting from thinking about change to actually making changes), which may contribute to their getting stuck in limbo in the middle stages. Importantly, and
consistent with Burke et al., helping relationships were apparent in each stage of change, underscoring the importance of formal and informal social support systems in helping women leave abusive partners (Zlotnick, Johnson, & Kohn, 2006) and maintain separation (Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003).

Achieving Boundary Clarity Beyond Physical Separation

Once mothers had stayed separated from their abusive partners for at least six months, they moved into the stage of maintenance. Compared to the other stages of change, maintenance has received the least empirical attention, perhaps because of misconceptions that abuse ends after women physically leave. However, studies report continuing and, in some cases, increased violence against women after separation (e.g., Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Hotton, 2001). Indeed, “leaving for the battered woman is the continuation of a process that . . . extends well beyond her physical departure” (Anderson & Saunders, 2003, p. 179). In the current study, mothers’ efforts to achieve boundary clarity persisted in maintenance despite being physically separated.

In the stage of maintenance, Type IV boundary ambiguity (or boundary intrusion; Lee, 1995) emerged as abusers, being outside entities, reasserted an unwanted physical and psychological presence in mothers’ lives. Because the abuser no longer had access to his former partner within the relationship, he resorted to maintaining his physical and/or psychological presence in her life through means of boundary intrusion. Wuest et al. (2003) found that boundary intrusion interfered with mothers’ and children’s health (e.g., increased negative physical and psychological symptoms) as well as their ability to achieve boundary clarity and move on with their lives. In the current study, both physical and nonphysical controlling intrusion were reported. Because mothers in maintenance were highly committed to preserving safety, they responded to their abusers’ boundary intrusion in a way that promoted further
change and safety. Specifically, mothers renegotiated boundaries to achieve boundary clarity either by parenting alone (i.e., single parents) or by parenting with their former partners (i.e., coparents).

Both forms of renegotiated boundaries in the current study are similar to the types of coparenting relationships formed after separation from an abusive partner in Hardesty et al. (2008). The types of coparenting relationships in Hardesty et al. varied according to how well abusers differentiated their roles as a former partner from a father. In the current study, all seven single mothers in maintenance reported parenting without their former partners and did not differentiate abusers’ role as a partner from a father. Most also reported intimate terrorism in the relationship and ongoing safety concerns in maintenance. These single mothers’ experiences are similar to those reported by mothers with poorly differentiated former husbands in Hardesty et al.’s study. Conversely, 10 mothers in maintenance in the current study had achieved boundary clarity by coparenting with their former partners and differentiating abusers’ role as a former partner from a father. These coparents’ experiences are similar to those reported by mothers with well-differentiated former husbands in Hardesty et al.’s study. Although Hardesty et al. found situational couple violence to be predominant among most mothers with well-differentiated former husbands, I did not find this pattern of IPV among the coparents in the current study. Perhaps this difference is because most women in the current study had experienced intimate terrorism ($n = 20$), and of the five who experienced situational couple violence, only two (one single parent, one coparent) were in maintenance at the time of the interview. Thus, comparisons between single parents and coparents based on type of IPV in the current study were not possible. Based on Hardesty et al.’s findings, however, types of IPV appear to be an important context influencing the formation of different coparenting relationships.
The tasks of renegotiating boundaries and achieving boundary clarity in maintenance appeared to be more challenging for coparents compared to single parents. First, coparenting simply presented more opportunities for abusers’ boundary intrusion to occur (e.g., while exchanging children for time with each parent). Second, these tasks were further complicated because mothers either wanted to coparent or felt forced to coparent with abusers. Mothers who wanted to coparent deemed father involvement as important and, thus, were more willing to facilitate father-child relationships, consistent with Wuest et al.’s (2003) findings. On the other hand, mothers who felt forced to coparent did not deem father involvement as important but feel that they had to abide to a legal system (e.g., family courts) that required them to coparent despite a history of IPV (Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003). These coparents must strike a delicate balance between maintaining safety and separation, while facilitating father-child relationships. As a result, achieving boundary clarity may be more challenging for coparenting mothers compared to single mothers.

Limitations of the Current Study

The results of the current study should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the sample may be unique due to self-selection bias. Specifically, mothers who chose to participate in this study may be unique because they self-identified with the descriptions provided on the recruitment flyers (see Appendix C), which other mothers, who met the criteria to participate, may not have found applicable to their own situations. Also, mothers who self-identified with the descriptions but did not respond may have different experiences than those who responded (e.g., more safety concerns). Future studies that utilize random samples of abused women in the process of leaving may be necessary to reduce the potential for self-selection bias.
The results are also limited by the uneven sample distribution across the stages of change (see Table 2). Originally, I sought to include mothers from all stages of change to address limitations of prior studies that have only sampled women in maintenance. Despite efforts to recruit mothers from all stages of change, most participants (72%) in this study were in maintenance. The uneven sample distribution may be explained by limitations in the recruitment methods. For example, recruitment flyers included the question “Are you currently trying to leave your relationship?” Indeed, mothers in earlier stages such as precontemplation and contemplation may not have identified themselves as “currently trying to leave” their partners. Further, the statement “We would like to talk to moms in this situation who have ever separated (either temporarily or permanently) from their partners” may also have limited responses from mothers in the early stages of change.

Mothers in the early stages of change are typically less ready to leave and may be experiencing denial and/or ambivalence. Thus, they may be less self-aware of their situations and may not identify themselves as being in the process of leaving. These mothers may also be more hesitant to participate in a research study (e.g., fear of retaliation if their partners found out). In contrast, mothers in maintenance have been separated for at least six months. They may be more self-aware of their situations and more willing to participate in a research study. These limitations suggest the need for enhanced recruitment methods that specifically target women in the early stages of change. For example, researchers may need to recruit women who report ever being physically hurt in their current relationship, regardless of whether they have ever thought about or tried to leave.

The overrepresentation of mothers in maintenance also resulted in this study’s primary reliance on retrospective data, which creates the potential for recall bias. Recall bias is a salient
problem in IPV research because abused women are also at heightened risk for psychological health effects (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder) that may impact their ability to recall or disclose experiences of abuse (Yoshihama & Gillespie, 2002). Particularly among mothers who experienced multiple separations over an extended period of time, the ability to recall events may be affected by high degrees of stress and health problems. The potential for recall bias could be reduced in future studies by sampling mothers in all stages of change to obtain current perceptions in the process of leaving. In addition, using effective memory aids (e.g., family diagrams or calendars to plot a timeline) during interviews may help abused women recall specific perceptions and events.

Despite these limitations, results from the current study contribute to understanding the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model. To my knowledge, this study is the first to integrate the distinct literatures of boundary ambiguity and the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model. The theoretical integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model highlights the process of leaving as a systemic, fluid and nonlinear process. The results delineate the dual influence of boundary ambiguity as a barrier to and facilitator of change, extending prior work conceptualizing boundary ambiguity as only a barrier. Research and practical implications from this theoretical integration are discussed in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the current study, I integrated the family construct of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model and delineated the different types and indicators of boundary ambiguity in different stages of change. The inclusion of boundary ambiguity addresses current limitations in the Stages of Change Model that have been outlined by several IPV researchers (e.g., Brown, 1997; Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006) and answers Boss’s (2007) call for extending boundary ambiguity to new understudied areas in family research (e.g., the process of leaving). The results have important implications for future research, theory, and practice.

Implications for Research and Theory

The integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model suggests implications for future research using this model and for the theoretical development of the model in its current form. In this section, I discuss four areas that may be the most significant next steps in research on the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model. Based on the results from this study, future work should focus on extending the systemic focus in the Stages of Change Model, employing innovative data collection methods to capture the systemic nature of the process of leaving, reevaluating the stage of maintenance in the model, and examining multiple contextual factors surrounding perceptions of and responses to boundary ambiguity.

Extending the Systemic Focus in the Stages of Change Model

Results from this study suggest that mothers’ process of leaving is systemic, fluid and nonlinear, involving the influences of abusers (and children) throughout the Stages of Change Model. Specifically, the integration of boundary ambiguity into the individual-focused Stages of Change Model highlights the systemic nature in the process of leaving. Given the lack of Stages of Change Model studies that conceptualize the process of leaving within a relational or systemic
context, researchers can utilize the integrated model as a theoretical framework for exploring future research questions related to the process of leaving. For example, researchers may want to extend the systemic focus of the model by delineating the role of children in influencing mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity at each stage of change.

In this study, being a mother was an important contextual factor that influenced mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity and their stay/leave decisions at each stage of change. For example, despite the abuse, precontemplators adapted to their relationships because they wanted to preserve their family relationships (e.g., father-child relationships). Then in action, mothers reestablished their psychological connections and returned to their partners because of their children (e.g., children missed their fathers). Finally, in maintenance, most mothers who coparented deemed father involvement as important and, thus, were more willing to facilitate father-child relationships. In these stages, gendered ideology related to being a mother seemed to influence mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity and, subsequently, their process of leaving. Specifically, the ideology of mothering suggests that mothers devote themselves to the care of others (Arendell, 2000) and to maintaining kinship ties (DiLeonardo, 1987). Such gendered ideologies were invoked in the narratives; for example, most mothers in this study reported that they probably would have left their abusive partners sooner had they not been a mother (e.g., because it would have been easier to have a clean break). These results suggest that in order to extend the systemic focus of the Stages of Change Model, future research must take into account the context of being a mother (as well as other gendered ideologies; e.g., being a wife) in the process of leaving.

In addition, future studies using the Stages of Change Model should explore the influence of systems external to the family that may influence mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity
Another potential direction is to explore and/or compare others’ perceptions of family boundaries within the family system (e.g., children’s). In this study, I explored boundary ambiguity from mothers’ perspective; however, as boundary ambiguity research (e.g., Stewart, 2005) suggests, perceptions of boundary ambiguity may vary between different individual family members. For example, researchers could explore children’s perceptions of their fathers’ physical and psychological absence and presence and how these perceptions relate to their mothers’ process of leaving and affect children’s adjustment.

**Developing and Employing Innovative Data Collection Methods**

To capture the relational and systemic dynamics in the process of leaving, researchers must develop and employ innovative methods of data collection. Recent research using the Stages of Change Model has accounted for women’s relationship status (Burke et al., 2009), such as by asking women to describe how they would define their relationship to their abuser (e.g., boyfriend, husband, ex-husband). Similarly, I asked mothers in this study to draw their family diagrams as a visual representation of how they defined family boundaries and relationships over time. Results from this study suggest that this technique was effective in capturing and comparing mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity over time, as supplemental data to their narratives. Efforts to explore the systemic nature of the process of leaving should also include systems-based methods and measures. Mixed-method studies that utilize quantitative (e.g., the Boundary Ambiguity Scale) and qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth narratives) to capture family-level processes and change are needed to explore the systemic nature of the process of leaving.

Future research should also use longitudinal prospective designs with larger samples to further delineate how boundary ambiguity operates within linear and nonlinear trajectories of
leaving (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). Results from this study suggest that perceptions of boundary ambiguity change throughout the process of leaving. Longitudinal prospective research could track the factors that contribute to these perceptual shifts (including abusers’ and children’s actions) and how these shifts relate to women’s decisions to stay or leave. As discussed in Chapter 5, it is possible that women who leave in a continuous linear model perceive less boundary ambiguity (i.e., boundary clarity) in their relationships, which could explain why they were able to maintain permanent separation without relapsing. In contrast, women who leave in a discontinuous cyclical model may experience more boundary ambiguity, which could explain their relapses and fluctuating absences and presences in the middle stages of change. Mapping these trajectories using longitudinal methods would shed light on how boundary ambiguity influences (and is influenced by) linear and nonlinear movement across the stages of change. In particular, boundary ambiguity as a potential facilitator of change warrants further attention, as past research has identified boundary ambiguity as barrier only. In the current study, mothers appeared to be motivated to physically leave (and thus achieve boundary clarity) after psychologically disconnecting (i.e., becoming psychologically absent). This emotional leave-taking in contemplation, which created perceptions of boundary ambiguity for mothers, appeared to be a necessary cognitive task before permanent separation was possible. Longitudinal research with abused mothers could help identify what conditions (i.e., frequency or severity of IPV, remedial work, perceived needs of children) facilitate emotional leave-taking.

Reevaluating the Stage of Maintenance

Research and theoretical advances are also needed to better understand the ongoing process of change after women leave abusive partners. Currently, the Stages of Change Model defines maintenance as sustaining change for at least six months. This definition is limited when
applied to abused women; for example, Burke et al. (2009) found that women who met the standard definition of being in maintenance also reported that they had “ended or tried to end” the relationship within the past six months as a means of keeping themselves safe. This suggests that the relationship, from the standpoint of abused women, does not necessarily end after physical separation. Results from the current study and others (Davies et al., 2009; Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Hardesty et al., 2008; Wuest et al., 2003) also indicate that violence and intrusion often continue after separation. Boundary intrusion may be particularly likely for mothers, as their contact with abusers may continue because of shared custody and/or ongoing court litigation. Because the process of leaving is unlike any other behavioral change (e.g., smoking cessation) that has been explored using the Stages of Change Model (Frasier et al., 2001), the model must be tailored to reflect the unique realities of abused women who face ongoing intrusion in maintenance. One possibility would be to expand the six-month timeframe of sustaining change in maintenance. Expanding this timeframe may change the focus of the model from the process of leaving to the process of achieving nonviolence. Leaving is not an option for some abused women; thus the process of achieving nonviolence (Campbell et al., 1998) may be more inclusive of women who seek change but do not leave or women who leave but continue to experience violence and/or intrusion.

Contextualizing Boundary Ambiguity

Finally, more research is needed to understand the contextual factors that influence boundary ambiguity and the process of leaving. In the current study, contextual factors such as mothers’ race did not appear to influence mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving. This was surprising, given Boss’ (1992) assertion that “differences in how events are perceived may relate to contextual factors like gender, generation, ethnicity, or race”
(p. 117). However, IPV research has found that the process of leaving often looks similar across different sociocultural contexts (e.g., Moss et al., 1997). It may be that within the context of leaving an abusive partner, internal factors such as mothers’ individual (e.g., readiness to change) and relational characteristics (e.g., abusers’ incongruent presence as partner and parent) are more salient in shaping mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity. For example, mothers in precontemplation perceived boundary ambiguity because abusers were psychologically absent as a partner and a father. On the other hand, culture and religion emerged as important contexts within which mothers decided to adapt in precontemplation. This finding is consistent with the core assumption of boundary ambiguity, in that “cultural beliefs and values influence a family’s tolerance for ambiguity” (Boss, 2007, p. 106). Here, culture and religion may be salient in influencing mothers’ responses in the process of leaving, consistent with the current IPV literature (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). In this study, narratives revealed many mothers’ adherence to religious scriptures or communities that discouraged them from leaving, for example, by reinforcing the belief that divorce was bad. At the same time, cultural messages that promoted the preservation of relationships and families bolstered such religious scripts, further encouraging mothers to adapt in precontemplation.

Another important contextual consideration is the type of IPV experienced (Johnson, 2008). Because the majority of mothers in the current sample experienced intimate terrorism, this study could not draw any conclusions as to how boundary ambiguity is perceived differently based on type of IPV (e.g., intimate terrorism versus situational couple violence). However, research shows that women who experience intimate terrorism and situational couple violence have qualitatively different forms of renegotiated boundaries between former partners (Hardesty et al., 2008) and helpseeking behaviors (Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2007). Thus, it is possible
that women who experience intimate terrorism and situational couple violence have different perceptions of and responses to boundary ambiguity in their process of leaving. Future research is needed to understand how different types of IPV relate to women’s perceptions of boundary ambiguity. For example, future research could explore the intersections of multiple contextual factors (e.g., race, type of IPV and socioeconomic status) to better understand the complexity of leaving abusive relationships.

Implications for Practice

The integration of boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model has important implications for the practical utility of the model when used in an intervention setting with abused women. In its current form, the model does not adequately capture the systemic nature of the process of leaving. Two areas that are fruitful for future practice include reevaluating the preparation stage and incorporating concrete intervention goals into the Stages of Change Model using Boss’ (2006) strength-based framework.

Reevaluating Preparation

The results of the current study raise questions about whether preparation is a necessary stage in the Stages of Change Model. Consistent with other findings (e.g., Chang et al., 2006), almost half of mothers in this sample did not engage in the stage of preparation. Importantly, whether or not they prepared did not appear to affect their process of leaving. For example, there were no differences in mothers’ perceptions of boundary ambiguity or in their ability to maintain separation and renegotiate boundaries after separation. These results suggest that the stage of preparation may not be necessary for all women to permanently leave an abusive partner. Indeed, preparation may be a task that is necessary for ensuring safety when leaving but not necessary for the process of change itself, whereas the other stages may be necessary for change itself to occur.
The utility of the Stages of Change Model might actually be improved if preparation was incorporated into the contemplation stage rather than included as a separate stage. Doing so would bring greater attention to the stages in which perceptions of boundary ambiguity do hinder and/or facilitate the change process. Education and resources related to preparation (e.g., safety planning) could be incorporated throughout the model as each stage presents unique safety risks (e.g., ongoing intrusion in maintenance); thus such information would be useful to women at any level of readiness to change (Chang et al., 2006). Indeed, Burke et al. (2009) reported that women across all stages of change (not just in preparation) wanted information about IPV and ways to stay safe via domestic violence hotlines, peer advocates, and counselors.

Regardless of stage, efforts to educate abused mothers about preparing for their safety must take into account issues of race, socioeconomic status, and parenting demands. Most mothers in the current study who prepared to leave were White and employed with older children at the time of their most recent separation. Conversely, most mothers who did not prepare were Black and unemployed with younger children. This finding may be explained by various sociocultural influences on mothers’ decisions to seek help for IPV and their selection of a help provider (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). In making the decision to seek help for IPV, Black women may feel culturally bound to uphold a “community code of silence” (Taylor, 2002, p. 81) to protect their abusers from being legally reprimanded for IPV and to prevent accusations of racial disloyalty. Black women may also experience pressures to maintain a social discourse of being the strong fighter “who can take all sorts of abuse” (Collins, 1998; p. 927); thus, making decisions to seek help or engaging in preparations to leave would challenge such social discourse and perpetuate Black women as victims. In terms of selecting a help provider, racial and ethnic minority as well as lower income women may face structural barriers
to helpseeking that preclude traditional forms of preparation, such as securing another place to live or obtaining a protective order. Indeed, studies have found that Black and Hispanic women are less likely to perceive formal helpseeking systems (e.g., law enforcement and court system) as helpful (Few, 2005; Ingram, 2007), which may inhibit them from seeking help to leave. Also, mothers with younger children may have greater day-to-day parenting demands that limit their ability to plan. For example, some mothers in this study reported not preparing because there was simply no opportunity to prepare. Thus, interventions that emphasize the importance of preparing to leave must consider how such contextual factors create barriers to active preparation.

Incorporating Boss’ Strength-Based Intervention Framework

While the Stages of Change Model is theoretically and practically useful (Frasier et al., 2001), recent studies have noted the challenges in designing a stage-based intervention approach for abused women in the process of leaving (Burke et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2006). The conundrum lies in designing interventions that address the complexity of the process of leaving while also providing a standard model that can be applied to all (or most) abused women. Based on the results of the current study, the practical utility of the Stages of Change Model as an intervention tool could be improved using Boss’ (2006) strength-based framework. Boss’ framework includes six key goals: finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment, and discovering hope. These goals can guide practitioners’ efforts to help abused women resolve different types of boundary ambiguity that emerge throughout the stages of change. While all six goals may be relevant in all stages of change, certain goals may be more critical at particular stages (see Table 4).

First, in precontemplation, practitioners can help mothers work towards finding meaning and normalizing the ambivalence that they experience over their perceived psychological loss of
abusers as a partner and a father. According to Boss (2006), finding meaning is the attempt to make sense of a particular event or situation (e.g., abusers’ psychological absence). Finding meaning subsequently shapes individuals’ responses to the event or situation (Thompson, 1985). Because precontemplators do not yet define their situations as abusive, interventions can be geared toward helping women recognize and understand their situation enough to move them out of denial. This process must be done in a nonjudgmental way so as to not overwhelm or alienate women (Zink et al., 2004). At the same time, practitioners can help women normalize ambivalence by internalizing the idea that “it is acceptable to feel conflicted” (Huebner et al., 2007, p. 121) about their relationships. Mothers in this study reported ongoing feelings of ambivalence even after moving into contemplation; thus, consistent messages that normalize feelings of ambivalence in all stages of change can be a powerful intervention tool.

Once out of precontemplation, the goal of tempering mastery may be most salient as mothers begin to psychologically disconnect from their abusive partners while they are still physically present in the relationship. Tempering mastery or fostering a sense of control (Boss, 2006) is similar to the Stages of Change Model’s construct of self-efficacy and consistent with the sense of autonomy that abused women want to have in working with practitioners (Chang et al., 2005). By feeling that they have more control over their situations, mothers may be able to further psychologically disconnect from their relationships, facilitating the process of emotional leave-taking and empowering them to physically leave. In other words, tempering mastery may facilitate leaving and achieving boundary clarity by helping mothers who have psychologically disengaged to physically leave in action.

Once physically separated in action, the goals of reconstructing identity and revising attachment may help mothers maintain separation from their abusive partners. Both goals may be
particularly salient in facilitating mothers’ adjustment from “we” to “I” (Kaplan, 2001) in action and helping them renegotiate family boundaries in maintenance. Reconstructing identity, for example, involves mothers reclaiming prior identities before the abusive relationship began (e.g., being single) and assuming new roles and tasks after separation. Practitioners should ensure that mothers have the necessary skills to be successful in these new roles (Boss, 2006). For example, economic insecurity is an important barrier to change (Kim & Gray, 2008). Reconstructing identity by facilitating mothers’ financial and social independence from their former partners can be monumental in moving them toward maintenance. Indeed, research has underscored the importance of community-coordinated responses that address women’s tangible needs, including provision of employment, housing, food, childcare and healthcare assistance (Moe, 2007).

For the goal of revising attachments, practitioners can facilitate mothers’ ability to develop new attachments to support their newly constructed identities. After losing an important attachment figure, such as a partner, “survivors often turn away from the world, and withdraw into apathy” (Boss, 2006, p. 165). To prevent the potential for social isolation and psychological distress, practitioners can encourage mothers to “reconnect to available and caring persons” (p. 166). New attachments separate from the former partner may help solidify reconstructed identities (e.g., single mother) and renegotiated boundaries between former partners. Forming new attachments may also reduce the potential for boundary intrusion. In the current sample, having a new partner appeared to be a protective factor against abusers’ boundary intrusion in maintenance. Additionally, practitioners can help normalize potential feelings of guilt among mothers who wish to date again, which is a common emotion after separation or divorce (Boss et al., 1990). New attachments can also be considered helping relationships, which studies
document are crucial to moving women forward in the Stages of Change Model regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, or education (e.g., Burke et al., 2004; 2009; Chang et al., 2006).

Finally, the goal of discovering hope can be applied in interventions with abused women across all stages of change. Decades of research indicate that IPV, especially intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008), creates a host of physical and psychological problems that interfere with women’s ability to cope and move on with their lives after physically leaving the relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Thus, discovering hope is arguably the most important goal in helping women break free from IPV (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995) and achieving boundary clarity in maintenance. Offering hope should be a central focus in interventions with IPV survivors (Mitchell & Anglin, 2009). Using “change maps” to document women’s movement across the Stages of Change Model is one way to foster hope with abused women. Conceptualizing leaving as a process, rather than an event, and visually illustrating their process of leaving can be revealing for women who feel that they are stuck or not making progress (Chang et al., 2006). Including fluctuations in mothers’ and abusers’ psychological and physical presence across the stages may also help mothers understand how perceptions of boundaries influence their decisions. These revelations may then foster a sense of hope that they can permanently leave their partners and achieve nonviolence.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The application of the Stages of Change Model to theorizing women’s process of leaving has advanced knowledge about how and why women make decisions to leave (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Guided by a feminist perspective and family stress theory, the current study used grounded theory methods to theoretically integrate boundary ambiguity into the Stages of Change Model to enhance the model’s theoretical, empirical, and practical utility. Based on in-depth interviews with 25 abused mothers, this study found various types and indicators (or evidence) of boundary ambiguity across the stages that influenced women’s experiences of leaving.

In precontemplation, Type II boundary ambiguity emerged as abusers became psychologically absent as a partner and father while physically present in the relationship. As partners, Type II boundary ambiguity was indicated by abusers’ violence, lessened commitment and lack of care for mothers’ wellbeing. As fathers, the indicators included abusers’ lack of involvement as a father and their emotional withdrawal from their children. However, because mothers in precontemplation were not yet ready to contemplate change, they responded to boundary ambiguity with denial and ambivalence, which prevented change. Once mothers began contemplating change, they moved into the middle stages of change. In contemplation and preparation, Type II boundary ambiguity emerged as mothers psychologically disengaged from their partners while remaining physically in their relationships. Conversely in action, Type I boundary ambiguity emerged as mothers’ psychological connection to their partners resurfaced after they had physically left their relationships. Throughout the middle stages of change, mothers appeared to have an “in/out” relationship status (Campbell et al., 1998), in which they were neither completely in nor completely out of their relationships. This finding indicates that
the process of leaving is a fluid transitional process from being in the relationship to “in/out” to being completely out of the relationship. Finally, in maintenance, mothers perceived boundary intrusion (i.e., Type IV boundary ambiguity) as abusers forced their physical and/or psychological presence in mothers’ lives after separation. Mothers perceived abusers’ presence as unwanted and boundary intrusion interfered with their efforts to move on with their lives. Boundary renegotiation was necessary for mothers to achieve boundary clarity (i.e., perceiving abusers as no longer physically or psychologically a part of their family), either as single parents or as coparents with their former partners. For coparents, abusers were involved in children’s lives, which presented further opportunities for boundary intrusion.

Despite several limitations, the results of this study make several important research and theoretical contributions. First, results address current limitations of the Stages of Change Model by highlighting the process of leaving as a systemic, fluid and nonlinear process. These dynamics are not readily captured in the current individual-based Stages of Change Model. Future studies should extend these efforts by using innovative methods to capture the systemic nature of the process of leaving. Longitudinal research using diverse samples with prospective methods is needed to delineate various trajectories of leaving that may be shaped by different perceptions of boundary ambiguity. Second, results from this study also contribute to the boundary ambiguity literature by identifying boundary ambiguity as both a barrier to and facilitator of change. For example, boundary ambiguity appeared to facilitate change through mothers’ emotional leave-taking in contemplation and preparation. This finding also highlights the importance of women psychologically and physically separating from an abusive partner in order to maintain separation. Third, results from this study contribute to the Stages of Change Model by further delineating mothers’ experiences in the stage of maintenance. Specifically, achieving boundary
clarity extended well beyond mothers’ physical separation from their abusive partners. Mothers continued to perceive boundary ambiguity as a result of abusers’ boundary intrusion in maintenance, suggesting the need for further research on the ongoing process of change in maintenance. Finally, results from this study have several implications for future practice with abused mothers, including reevaluating the preparation stage and incorporating concrete intervention goals. Instead of a distinct preparation stage, it may be necessary to offer education and resources geared toward helping women to safety plan in all stages of change. Further, to address boundary ambiguity and the systemic nature of the process of leaving in practice, practitioners may benefit from integrating Boss’ (2006) strength-based intervention framework into the Stages of Change Model.

To my knowledge, this study is the first to theoretically integrate the two distinct bodies of literature on boundary ambiguity and the process of leaving using the Stages of Change Model. Results enhance what researchers know about women’s process of leaving using this model by highlighting the complex relational role of boundary ambiguity. Given this knowledge, researchers and practitioners can potentially move toward improving the model to help women leave their abusive relationships while promoting their safety, health, and agency.
REFERENCES


FIGURES AND TABLES

**Figure 1.** Diagram of Women’s Movements in the Process of Leaving Using the Stages of Change Model (adapted from Burke et al., 2001; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007)
Figure 2. The ABC-X Family Stress Model (adapted from Boss, 1988; Hill, 1958)
Figure 3. The Grounded Theory Process Utilized in This Study (adapted from Charmaz, 2006)
Figure 4. Anna’s Family Diagram in Precontemplation
At the beginning of the relationship

(Me) (Abuser)

Figure 5. Sophie’s Family Diagram in Precontemplation
Figure 6. Anna’s Present Family Diagram in Precontemplation
Figure 7. Elena’s Present Family Diagram in Contemplation
Figure 8. Sophie’s Present Family Diagram in Action
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physically Present but</td>
<td>Physically Absent but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically Absent</td>
<td>Psychologically Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Type 2 BA)</td>
<td>(Type 1 BA)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“In” \[\rightarrow\] Stuck in Limbo \[\leftarrow\] “Out”

*Figure 9. Mothers’ Being Stuck in Limbo in the Middle Stages of Change*
Figure 10. Daphne’s Present Family Diagram as a Single Parent in Maintenance
Figure 11. Bianca’s Present Family Diagram as a Coparent in Maintenance
Figure 12. Trajectories in the Process of Leaving Using the Stages of Change Model (adapted from Khaw & Hardesty, 2007)
Table 1

Processes of Change (adapted from Burke et al., 2004; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Processes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consciousness raising</td>
<td>Seeking new information to understand the problem behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reevaluation</td>
<td>Emotional and cognitive reappraising of the problem behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic relief</td>
<td>Experiencing and expressing feelings about the problem behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental reevaluation</td>
<td>Considering and assessing how the problem behavior affects the individuals’ environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social liberation</td>
<td>Increasing awareness, availability, and acceptance by the individual of alternative, problem-free lifestyles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Processes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping relationships</td>
<td>Trusting, accepting, and using social support to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterconditioning</td>
<td>Learning and practicing alternative behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement management</td>
<td>Rewarding oneself or being rewarded by others for making changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-liberation</td>
<td>Choosing and committing to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulus control</td>
<td>Controlling situations and other causes that trigger the problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Demographic Characteristics by Stage of Change at the Time of the Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Late</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Precontemplation</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 1)</td>
<td>(n = 1)</td>
<td>(n = 0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ Age (in years)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ Number of Children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White (n = 1)</td>
<td>Hispanic (n = 1)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ Highest Level of Education</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ Length of Relationship (in years)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ Time Since Final Separation, As Defined by Mothers (in years)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

Types and Indicators of Boundary Ambiguity by Stage of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of Change</th>
<th>Precontemplation</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not define the abuse as a problem</td>
<td>Defines abuse as a problem; more aware of the pros and cons of leaving</td>
<td>Intends to leave and makes plans to leave</td>
<td>Actively makes changes to leave</td>
<td>Takes measures to prevent returning to the abuser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Boundary Ambiguity</th>
<th>Abusers are physically present but psychologically absent</th>
<th>Mothers are physically present but psychologically absent</th>
<th>Mothers are physically absent but psychologically present</th>
<th>Abusers are physically and/or psychologically present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type II boundary ambiguity</td>
<td>Type II boundary ambiguity</td>
<td>Type I boundary ambiguity</td>
<td>Type IV boundary intrusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of Boundary Ambiguity</th>
<th>Abusers’ violence</th>
<th>Mothers’ emotional leave-taking</th>
<th>Mothers’ lingering psychological connection to abusers</th>
<th>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ physical and/or psychological presence as unwanted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ lessened commitment</td>
<td>Mothers’ shifting perceptions</td>
<td>Mothers’ difficulty adjusting from “we” to “I”</td>
<td>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ physical presence as unwanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ lack of care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ lack of involvement as fathers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers’ perception of abusers’ emotional withdrawal from children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Possible Intervention Goals to Address Different Types of Boundary Ambiguity by Stage of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Boundary Ambiguity</th>
<th>Precontemplation</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abusers’ Psychological Absence as a Partner and Father</td>
<td>Abusers’ Psychological Absence as a Partner and Father</td>
<td>Mothers’ Psychological Absence</td>
<td>Mothers’ Psychological Presence</td>
<td>Mothers’ Psychological Intrusion</td>
<td>Abusers’ Psychological Intrusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Type II Boundary Ambiguity)</td>
<td>(Type II Boundary Ambiguity)</td>
<td>(Type I Boundary Ambiguity)</td>
<td>(Type IV Boundary Ambiguity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Goals (Boss, 2006)</td>
<td>Finding meaning</td>
<td>Normalizing ambivalence</td>
<td>Reconstructing identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normalizing ambivalence</td>
<td>Tempering mastery</td>
<td>Revising attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discovering hope</td>
<td>Discovering hope</td>
<td>Discovering hope</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

128
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTRODUCTION SCRIPT
Thank you for meeting with me today. The purpose of this interview is to explore your experience as a mother who has left an abusive partner at some point in your relationship. Anything you tell me is confidential. I will not judge you based on your responses and if I am silent during the interview, I am waiting for you to elaborate more. You can choose not to answer any questions. If you need to take a break during the interview, please let me know. May I tape record this interview? Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

A. FAMILY DIAGRAM, ABUSE HISTORY & BEGINNING OF RELATIONSHIP

First, I would like to know you and your family a little better. Can you please draw a picture of your family in the beginning of your relationship with your (former) partner? Draw yourself in the center and include as many or as few people in there as you would like. (If conducting phone interview, offer to draw the picture as she describes her picture.)

Now let’s talk more about the people in your picture and the start of your relationship.

1. Who are these people and how are they related to you?
   (Identify and label people’s initials/first names. Identify relationships between people in the picture. Ask general demographic questions as she describes her family picture.)

2. Tell me about the time when your relationship with your (former) partner began.

3. How would you describe the start of your relationship? (Prompt: What are the good things about your relationship with your (former) partner back then? What are the not so good things?)

4. Describe the first time when you were aware there was a problem in your relationship.

5. Describe the first time your (former) partner had (or tried to) physically hurt you.

6. Describe the most frightening or upsetting situation that occurred in your relationship.

7. How did this incident affect you and your family? (Prompt: How did you and your children respond to this incident?)

8. What was your children’s relationship like with their father before you left/attempted to leave him? (Prompt: How did your children view their father at this time? To what extent was he involved as a father to your children?)
9. Thinking back on your (former) partner’s behaviors, to what extent do you think that his behaviors changed over time before you decided to leave?

10. Who knew what was going on in your relationship? (Prompt: friend, family, colleague)

B. Decisions to Leave

In the next few questions, I would like to know about how you made your decision to leave.

1. Tell me about the time when you decided to leave. (Prompt: What were some of the reasons why you left?)

2. Some women make plans to leave and others do not. To what extent do you think was planning a part of your leaving?

3. How did your (former) partner react (verbally, physically, emotionally) when you decided to leave? (Prompt: Did you tell him that you wanted to leave? What did he do after you left?)

4. How did your children react (verbally, physically, emotionally) to your decision to leave?

5. What were some reactions (verbally, physically, emotionally) from your family, friends and colleagues outside of the home, when you decided to leave/ left? (Prompt: Did you feel that your decision to leave was supported?)

6. How many times have you left/ tried to leave? (If multiple attempts, ask: When was your most recent attempt? Describe the attempt that was most memorable to you. How did your experience change each time you left/ tried to leave?)

C. Potential Boundary Ambiguity & Present Family Relationships

You’ve given really good insights about how you made decisions in your relationship. I am interested to learn more about how your family was affected by this process. I would like you to draw a second picture, this time of how you think your family looks like right now. Again, include only those you consider to be a part of your family. (If there are no changes from 1st picture, say: OK we’ll talk about that in a bit.)

Only for moms who left ONCE:

1. I would like you to look at (for phone interviews: consider) both pictures. Walk me through what is different in these pictures. How has your family changed compared to the beginning of your relationship with your (former) partner? How has leaving your (former) partner affected your family in general? (Prompt: How would you describe your relationship now? How do you feel about it?)
If no changes in picture: I would like you to look at your picture again. You mentioned that there is no difference now in your family, compared to the beginning of your relationship. That is interesting to me because some women draw different pictures of their families when they leave. What are your thoughts about your family picture being the same after you left? (Prompt: Is there anything different about your family that cannot be shown in your picture? e.g., relationship with in-laws)

2. What kind of contact did you have with your (former) partner when you were separated from him? (Prompt: To what extent did you consider your (former) partner as a part of your life? e.g., did you consider him a friend, partner, father of your child?)

3. Looking back, how easy or how difficult was it for you to leave your (former) partner? (Prompt: Were there other options you considered besides leaving?)

4. Describe how leaving your (former) partner has affected your children. (Prompt: How has your role as a mother been affected by the abuse and by the process of leaving? Has your relationship with your children been affected by your decisions to leave? If so, how?)

5. Describe your children’s relationship with your (former) partner now. (Prompt: What is currently the custody arrangement for your children? How do your children view your (former) partner/their father?)

6. Tell me your thoughts about his involvement with your children. (Prompt: What role do you play in your children’s relationship with your (former) partner? What are some things that you do to keep him involved/limit his involvement with your children?)

7. How different do you think your decisions or your experiences of leaving would be if you were not a mother?

8. To what extent do you consider your (former) partner’s extended family members to be a part of your life now?

9. For some women, they feel better after leaving their partners, but for others, they feel worse. Compared to the beginning of your relationship, describe your current feelings toward your (former) partner since you left.

10. What are some of the good things of being separated from your (former) partner?

11. What are some of the bad things of being separated from your (former) partner?

12. If remarried or has new partner: How is your relationship with your new partner? (Prompt: What kind of role did he/she play in your process of leaving? How is your children’s relationship with your new partner?)
13. Many women leave more than once before they permanently leave their abusers. You stayed separated and never returned to your former (partner). How do you think you stayed separated after leaving just once?

Only for moms who left MULTIPLE TIMES

1. I would like you to look at/consider both pictures. Walk me through what is different in these pictures. (Prompt: How has your family changed compared to the beginning of your relationship with your (former) partner? How has leaving your (former) partner affected your family in general? How would you describe your relationship now? How do you feel about it?)

   If no changes in 1st picture: I would like you to look at your picture again. You mentioned that there is no difference now in your family, compared to the beginning of your relationship. That is interesting to me because some women draw different pictures of their families when they leave. What are your thoughts about your family picture being the same after you left? (Prompt: Is there anything different about your family that cannot be shown in your picture? e.g., relationship with in-laws)

2. What kind of contact did you have with your (former) partner when you were separated from him? (Prompt: Each time that you left, to what extent did you consider him as a part of your life? e.g., did you consider him a friend, partner, father of your child?)

3. Looking back, how easy or how difficult was it for you to leave your (former) partner? (Prompt: Were there other options you considered besides leaving?)

4. Many women experience multiple separations for many years before they permanently leave their abusers or resolve to stay in their relationships. I understand it is a difficult process and women have various reasons for leaving and returning. What are your thoughts about returning to your (former) partner? (Prompts: How did your children respond when you returned? How did your family, friends or colleagues respond when you returned? Was your decision to return supported?)

5. Describe how leaving your (former) partner has affected your children. (Prompt: How has your role as a mother been affected by the abuse and by the process of leaving? Has your relationship with your children been affected by your decisions to leave? If so, how?)

6. Describe your children’s relationship with your (former) partner now. (Prompt: What is currently the custody arrangement for your children? How do your children view your (former) partner/their father?)

7. Tell me your thoughts about his involvement with your children. (Prompt: What role do you play in your children’s relationship with your (former) partner? What are some things that you do to keep him involved/limit his involvement with your children?)
8. How different do you think your decisions or your experiences of leaving would be if you were not a mother?

9. To what extent do you consider your (former) partner’s extended family members to be a part of your life now?

10. For some women, they feel better after leaving their partners, but for others, they feel worse. Compared to the beginning of your relationship, describe your current feelings toward your (former) partner since you left.

11. What are some of the good things of being separated from your (former) partner?

12. What are some of the bad things of being separated from your (former) partner?

13. *If remarried or has new partner:* How is your relationship with your new partner? (*Prompt:* What kind of role did he/she play in your process of leaving? How is your children’s relationship with your new partner?)

D. **Future Plans**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me on your family relationships. You are giving me really good insights. Now let’s talk a bit about your current plans for the future.


2. What are your current priorities for you and your family? (*Prompts depending on current situation, e.g., living in shelter, remarried, currently with abuser*)

3. How do you foresee your relationship with your (former) partner over the next five years? (*Prompt:* Social relationship, parental relationship, financial relationship)

4. How do you foresee your children’s relationship with your (former) partner over the next five years?

5. You have experienced leaving an abusive partner, which is a very difficult thing to do for many women because of safety reasons. What is helping (has helped) you to keep yourself safe? What is standing (has stood) in the way of keeping yourself safe?

6. What would you have done differently if you had unlimited resources?

7. If you were to give advice to other mothers who are experiencing a similar situation and who are trying to make decisions about staying and leaving, what would you tell them?
E. **Demographic Information**

Finally, I have a few demographic questions for you before we end. 
*(Ask only those not covered in the interview).*

a. What is your date of birth?
b. What is your (former) partner’s date of birth?

c. How would you classify your race? *(Prompt: Caucasian, Black, etc.)*
d. How would you classify your (former) partner’s race?

e. What is your highest level of education?
f. What is your (former) partner’s highest level of education?

g. What is your current employment status?
h. What is your (former) partner’s current employment status?

i. What is the length of relationship with your (former) partner?
j. What was your relationship with (former) partner? *(Prompt: Boyfriend, fiancé, husband)*
k. Currently, are you permanently separated from your (former) partner? *(Prompt: How long have you been separated from your current/former partner?)*

l. How many children do you share with your (former) partner?
m. How old are your children?

n. What is your current marital status? *(Prompt: Married, separated, divorced, widowed, single)* Are you remarried?
o. What is your (former) partner’s current marital status? Is he remarried?

**Concluding Script**

Thank you so much for your willingness to talk to me today. I want you to know that I really admire your strength and your story has been inspiring. As a gesture of thanks, I would like to give you $30 for sharing your story with me. Also, I am including a list of potential resources as well as a safety planning guide *(if relevant)* that you may find useful.

Feel free to contact me after the interview if you have any questions or concerns later. Before we end today, do you have any questions for me?
March 4, 2008

Jennifer Hardesty
Department of Human & Community Development
243 Bevier Hall
MC-180

IRB Protocol Number: 08378

Dear Jennifer:

Your response to stipulations for the project entitled Exploring Boundary Ambiguity in the Process of Leaving an Abusive Partner: A Theoretical Expansion of the Stages of Change Model has satisfactorily addressed the concerns of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) and you are now free to proceed with the human subjects protocol. The UIUC IRB approved the protocol as described in your IRB-1 application with stipulated changes, as part of their monthly review. Certification of approval is available upon request. The expiration date for this protocol, UIUC number 08378, is 2/11/2009. The risk designation applied to your project is no more than minimal risk.

A copy of the enclosed date-stamped consent form must be used in obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent form, please submit the revised form for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

Under applicable regulations, no changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. The regulations also require that you promptly notify the IRB of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated side effects, adverse reactions, and any injuries or complications that arise during the project.

If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our Web site at http://www.irb.uiuc.edu.

Sincerely,

Sue Keen, Director, Institutional Review Board

Enclosure

c: Lyndal Bee Lian Khaw
U of I Research Study on Moms

Has your child’s father ever physically hurt you? Are you currently trying to leave your relationship?

We would like to talk to moms in this situation who have ever separated (either temporarily or permanently) from their partners.

If you might be interested in participating, contact us for more information:

Lyndal Khaw, M.S.
(Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jennifer Hardesty)
University of Illinois
(217) 333-6924 / khaw@illinois.edu

Participants Will Receive $30
Your Privacy Will Be Protected
APPENDIX D: TELEPHONE SCRIPT AND SCREENING SHEET

Moms’ Leaving Study
Telephone/E-mail Script and Screening Sheet

Phone Script

Thank you for your interest in this research study. I am Lyndal Khaw, a graduate student at the University of Illinois. This study is a part of my dissertation project. The purpose of this study is to learn how moms make decisions in relationships in which their partner has physically or emotionally hurt them. I am especially interested to hear mothers’ stories and thoughts about separating from their partners, and how that affects children and families. I am open to talking to moms who are either currently with their partners or who have left. I will conduct the interviews at a safe location. Your participation is voluntary and any information that you provide will be completely confidential. You will also receive $30 for sharing your story with me.

Is this something that you think you would like to participate in?

- Yes: Great. Is this a safe time for me to ask you several criteria questions?
  If yes, continue to screening criteria questions.
  If no, ask for a better time to call her back and contact her then

- No: That’s okay. At this time, do you have any concerns that I can address?
  If yes, listen to her concerns (e.g., privacy, safety issues) and make appropriate suggestions. Reassure her that her privacy and safety will be prioritized. Offer resources from the Resource List.

Screening Criteria

These questions are simply to see if you meet the criteria to participate in this study. Feel free to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

a) To establish motherhood status:
   Do you have a child under age 18 together with your former/current partner?

   If yes, continue screening.
   If no, explain that I am currently seeking to understand mothers’ experiences right now. Offer resources from Resource List.

b) To establish experiences of leaving:
   Regardless of whether you’re currently with your partner, have you ever experienced leaving or separating from him at any point throughout your relationship?

   If yes, continue screening.
If no, explain that I am currently seeking to understand the experiences of women who have ever left or separated from their abusive partner. Offer resources from Resource List.

If does not qualify, thank her for answering the questions and explain that I am currently interviewing women who have experienced repeated physical abuse. Offer resources from Resource List and ask if she would like to leave her name and contact information for future studies.

c) To establish a pattern of abuse:

Throughout your relationship, has your former/current partner ever:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screening Item (Physical Abuse)</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
<th>Freq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pushed or shoved you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat or grabbed you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kicked you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapped you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slammed you against the wall?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choked you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struck you with a weapon (e.g., gun, knife)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened to strike you with a weapon (e.g., gun, knife)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout your relationship, has your former/current partner ever:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screening Item (Coercive Control)</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
<th>Freq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to know everything you did or who you are with?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited your contact with others?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitored where you went or who you spent time with?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened to harm you or a loved one if you left?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If yes to any of the above, ask: **How frequent do you experience any of these acts?**
If no to any of the above, ask: **In what ways that I have not mentioned that would indicate your former/current partner physically hurting you?**

- If she experienced at least one act on more than one occasion, continue with screening.
- If she does not experience any physical abuse or coercive control, explain that this study is for women who have been physically hurt by their former/current partners.

Thank you for answering these questions.

I would like to schedule an interview with you. Interviews typically last 1 – 2 hours. What are some good times and safe places where we can meet for an interview?

Meeting Day/Date: ________________________ Time: ________________________

Assign Participant ID Number: ________________________
APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Revised Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
Mothers' Process of Change in Abusive Relationships

Who is conducting this study?

The present study is conducted as a dissertation research project by Lyndal Bee Lian Khaw, a doctoral student in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). This study is under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer L. Hardesty, Assistant Professor in the Department of Human and Community Development.

What is this study all about?

The purpose of this study is to learn about how mothers make decisions and experience change within the context of relationships in which their partners have physically or emotionally hurt them. I am specifically interested in exploring mothers' perspectives and thoughts about leaving their partners and how their decisions about leaving may have influenced them and their families. Mothers who are either in current relationships with an abusive partner or who have separated from their partners will be interviewed in this study.

What are the procedures?

I am asking you to join this research study. You will meet me for approximately 1-2 hours at a safe and convenient time and location that we agree upon. If you are unable to meet me, we can also do the interview over the phone. Before the interview begins, I will ask for your permission to audio record the interview for the sole purpose of transcribing the interview later. Granting permission to audio record the interview is not a requirement for your participation.

During the interview, I will ask you to draw me a picture of your family or I will draw it for you as you describe your family to me over the phone. I will ask you questions about the nature of your relationship with your former/current partner, your experiences over time and any separations you've had from your partner, how your children and family have managed things over time, and how things are going for you now. I will also ask if you have any concerns about your current situation, plans for the future, and if you need help or resources for yourself and your family. Research participants must be at least 18 years old.

What are my rights as a participant?

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is absolutely voluntary. You do not have to join this or any research study. If you do initially agree to participate, you may end your participation at any time throughout the research process with no penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will not affect your status at or future relations with the University of Illinois.
Confidentiality
To serve your best interest, all of the information that you share with me will be kept in strict privacy and confidence. Aside from me, access to interviews will only be given to my faculty advisor, Dr. Hardesty. My interview notes, audio recordings and interview transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a university office. Upon completion of the study, I will destroy audio recordings of all participants as an added security measure.

Anonymity
Your confidentiality is guaranteed. All identifying information in interview notes and interview transcripts will be immediately removed and replaced with pseudonyms (made-up information) or non-identifiable labels (e.g., participant1, participant2, etc.) Results of the study will be written and discussed without identifying you or your family. For example, I may use your direct quotes from the interview as examples in reporting the results but I will not use any names or identifying information in the quotes. If necessary, I will edit the quotes to remove the identifying information without changing the meaning of the quotes.

The only time I that I would have to tell someone about information disclosed during an interview is if I am told about recent or current child abuse (I am mandated by law to report child abuse) or if I am told that someone is thinking about hurting or killing herself or others. In these situations, I will have to release the information to the appropriate authorities so that they may take immediate steps to help the person.

What are the benefits, compensation and risks of participating in this study?

By participating in this study, you are providing valuable information about your experiences that will help us better understand the nature of domestic violence. The information will benefit other families who may have similar experiences in the future as what we learn from this study will help us and others plan services for women who experience domestic violence. Based on previous research studies, many women have also found it very helpful to share their stories. You will also be given $30 to thank you for participating. Payment will be provided for partial completion of the interview, if you choose to end the interview early.

The known risks involved in doing this study are minimal. Your safety is my primary concern and you are encouraged to relate any safety concerns that you may have about participating in this study before we begin. If necessary, we will discuss a safety plan to respond to any unexpected events that may occur during the interview. Additionally, you may experience some physical and/or emotional discomfort from sharing your experiences of abuse with me. That is understandable. You are encouraged to let me know if you feel overwhelmed or just wish to take a break from the interview. We can reschedule or stop the interview at any time. If you are still feeling uncomfortable after the interview is over, I will provide you with resources that may help further alleviate any discomfort.

Alternatives to Participation

You do not have to participate in this study. If you feel that you need to talk to someone about your experience or receive help, I can refer you to appropriate community resources.
Who do I contact if I have a question or concerns?

Please read this form carefully. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact Lyndal Khaw at (217) 333-6924 or e-mail khaw@uiuc.edu or the supervising faculty member Dr. Jennifer Hardesty at (217) 333-0725 or e-mail hardesty@uiuc.edu. If you want to know more about your rights as a human subject in UIUC-approved research, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at (217) 333-2670 or e-mail irb@uiuc.edu. You may call collect at this number if you identify yourself as a research participant. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your consent to participate in this research study means that you have read and understood the information given to you in this form. By giving consent, you are volunteering to participate in this research study and you are giving permission to the investigator to perform the procedures referred to, report research findings to scientific bodies and funding agencies; and to publish and present the findings in professional settings.

Participants’ Oral Consent Statement

1. Are you clear about how this interview works and what I am asking you to do? Please note that you can refuse to answer my question anytime and you can stop the interview at any time without any negative consequences.

*If yes:* Yes, I understand how this works and I understand my rights.

*If no:* Offer to answer any questions. Explain the informed consent form again if necessary.

2. Do you still wish to participate in this study?

*If yes:* Yes, I wish to participate in this study.

*If no:* I understand. Thank you so much for your time and interest. Please let me know if you have any other questions or need any help on finding resources. (Offer to answer any concerns about participating. For safety concerns, discuss possible safety back-up plans.)

3. May I audiotape this interview?
APPENDIX F: RESOURCE LIST FOR PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence</td>
<td>A resource that provides local services to women, including crisis telephone counseling, providing shelter and help in acquiring resources in the communities across the state of Illinois</td>
<td>1-877-863-6338</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ilcadv.org/">http://www.ilcadv.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Child Abuse Hotline</td>
<td>A 24-hour hotline to call for support or referrals or if you suspect child abuse</td>
<td>1-800-4-A-CHILD 1-800-2-A-CHILD (TDD)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.childhelpusa.org">www.childhelpusa.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Domestic Violence Hotline</td>
<td>A 24-hour crisis, resource, and referral line that connects people with resources in their own communities</td>
<td>1-800-799-SAFE 1-800-787-3224 (TDD)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ndvh.org">www.ndvh.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Women’s Health Information Center</td>
<td>Provides information and referrals for all women’s health questions</td>
<td>1-800-994-9662 1-800-220-5446 (TDD)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.4women.gov">www.4women.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Stress Hotline</td>
<td>A 24-hour support line for parents</td>
<td>1-800-632-8188</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape, Abuse &amp; Incest National Network</td>
<td>A 24-hour crisis line for support or referrals on sexual assault. Online hotline available.</td>
<td>1800-656-HOPE</td>
<td><a href="http://www.rainn.org">http://www.rainn.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safer Child, Inc.</td>
<td>An online guide for families in crisis, resources for parents to talk to their children about safety and links to help women and children find safety.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td><a href="http://www.saferchild.org/families.htm">http://www.saferchild.org/families.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mother Resources</td>
<td>A resource to help single mothers become more self-sufficient by providing assistance in managing their finances. The website also provides emotional resources for single mothers and parenting tips.</td>
<td>1-877-922-3383</td>
<td><a href="http://www.singlemotherresources.com/about_us.htm">http://www.singlemotherresources.com/about_us.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services</td>
<td>A resource that helps women to identify their rights according to different state legislatures, referrals for women seeking help from domestic violence. Safety-planning guides are available for download from the website.</td>
<td>1-800-994-9662 1-888-220-5446 (TDD)</td>
<td><a href="http://womenshealth.gov/violation/">http://womenshealth.gov/violation/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G: SAMPLE MAP USING THE STAGES OF CHANGE TIMELINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Precontemplation</th>
<th>Contemplation</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- met in 05/06</td>
<td>- realized</td>
<td>- quit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- married in 07/08</td>
<td>- when he left</td>
<td>- smoking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- wasn’t fulfilling as</td>
<td>- gained</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a relationship of</td>
<td>- God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- denying patterns</td>
<td>- religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- physical abuse</td>
<td>- child support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- mental abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to start all over again</td>
<td>- Calm before the physical &amp; mental abuse</td>
<td>- shift in perception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- “back to normal”</td>
<td>- “we won’t a good husband”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- child at father for leaving</td>
<td>- tried to negotiate the settlement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RELIGION**
- perception of family/religion - advice from spiritual leader who tells her...
- wanting marriage to work/kids
- “we got to do this for son/children”
- huge family support
- 1 year separ.
- child support pursued

**ACTION**
- filed for divorce
- trying to negotiate
- order of protection
- still allows kids to see dad
- forced daughter
- tried to see her father
- still misses him, loves him
- ambivalent
- child support continues
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Lyndal Bee Lian Khaw arrived in Champaign, Illinois in 2001 from her humble roots in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2003 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology, and stayed on to pursue her Master of Science degree in Human Development and Family Studies in 2006. As a scholar, Khaw’s research focuses on the dynamics of intimate partner violence on families. Her dissertation explores abused mothers’ perceptions of changing family boundaries and the impact on their process of leaving. With her mentor and coauthor, Dr. Jennifer Hardesty, her research has been published in *Family Relations* and the *Journal of Family Theory and Review* and has been featured in the national media including CNN.com Health and Chicago Public Radio. For her research activities, Khaw has been awarded the 2007 Jessie Bernard Award for Outstanding Research Proposal from a Feminist Perspective from the National Council for Family Relations, the 2008 Pampered Chef Dissertation Enhancement Award, and the 2009 College of ACES Graduate Student Research Award (Ph.D.). In addition, Khaw has been actively involved in teaching at the University of Illinois. She is included on the University’s *List of Teachers Rated as Excellent* and received the 2009 Louis V. Logeman Graduate Student Teaching Award and the 2009 North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA) Graduate Teaching Award. Following the completion of her doctoral program, Khaw will begin her professional career as an Assistant Professor in Family and Child Studies at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. She is a lifelong Illini fan who bleeds orange and blue, and currently lives in Champaign, Illinois with her husband Dr. Brian Nichols, and their beloved pets, Cadbury, Darwin and Josie.