

**ENDING RELATIONSHIP ABUSE
SOCIETY OF B.C.**

**(FORMERLY THE BRITISH COLUMBIA ASSOCIATION
OF COUNSELLORS OF ABUSIVE MEN)**



**ENDING VIOLENCE IN
RELATIONSHIPS:**

**A conference on research,
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intimate relationships**

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In the Name of Virtue

Thoughts about the polarizing effect of violence: Its impact on therapists and organisations

Steven Bélanger

***Abstract :** This paper highlights an aspect inherent in the phenomenon of conjugal violence, that is, its moral dimension. More specifically, the paper deals with the moral positioning which this dimension induces, as well as with the influence it has on the totality of strategies aimed at countering violence. These moral positionings generally condition a certain culture of aid services in conjugal violence for men in North America.*

The goal is to direct attention to the traps specific to the individual and collective motivations to want to create a society without violence and a world that is totally secure. Such an inclination risks deviating our therapeutic mandate to one of control. In the name of virtue, we may end up producing more bad than good if we do not respect the minimum conditions which permit us to protect the necessary therapeutic space in order to establish a solid therapeutic alliance. If we cannot equip ourselves with means to assist a man in ending his violent behaviour, we will not be able to improve the security of those close to him.

Author: Steven Bélanger, Psychologist and Clinical Coordinator of PRO-GAM Inc. (1453 Beaubien E., #205, Montreal (Quebec) H2G 3C6)

Introduction

I would like to bring forth in this article an indissociable aspect of violence, in particular of spousal violence or abuse: its moral dimension. No one can remain "neutral" when confronted with violence. Violence has a polarizing effect on individuals, an effect that is more or less notable according to the individual.

More precisely, violence induces opposite and sometimes extreme moral positions. We have a tendency to operate a cleavage of reality when facing the anxiety and discomfort generated by violence, to divide reality into antagonistic and mutually exclusive categories, into "all good" vs. "all bad", "the one who is right" vs. "the one who is wrong," "victim" vs. "aggressor", compassion vs. punishment, "woman" vs. "man", "danger" vs. "security."

This polarizing effect of violence may influence the different interveners who deal with this problem. It may also influence the choice of strategies aimed at countering the problem, particularly in this time of greater global political instability, where a certain obsession with violence and consequently a certain obsession about security could lead us to take disproportionate measures to insure our protection.

In our work to assist men in ending their violent behaviours, it appears important for me to consider the ways we counter spousal abuse as well as to prevent recidivism against the victims.

My goal is to draw attention to the possible traps peculiar to individual and collective motivations aimed at imperatively endowing ourselves with a "zero-risk society", with a society shedding any violence, with a world that is completely secure. In my opinion, such an inclination presents the risk of leading us away from an objective and realistic reading of the problem, of making us choose means ill-adapted to the needs of individuals and the community.

Having a moral position is not the problem, since we inevitably have one. What appears important to me is to question our own moral position, and what this could lead us to do in the name of Virtue.

Some observations

Ever since I began in this field, I was struck by the fervour and devotion with which the actors in all sectors approached this problem. Feminist militants had denounced this social scourge and made conjugal violence their "battle horse" for the fight for women's equality. They put pressure on the government who put pressure on the judicial system. The resources for violent men, for their part, were made the object of pressure from women's groups and the judicial system in general.

Everyone had to work in the same way, with the same ideology, the same theory. An indisputable dogma was set and has since served as a reference to the discourse and the practice in spousal abuse. A "decree" was dispatched to all interveners to denounce, condemn, eliminate spousal abuse. The slogan "zero tolerance" brought together all partisans of non-violence and inspired all intervention fields, from the schoolyard to the municipal Court. Henceforth, any expression of aggressiveness had to be sanctioned.

The 1995 Quebec government policy (1) ruled that "spousal abuse is criminal." From a strictly legal point of view, unless it concerned criminal harassment or death threats, psychological, verbal and economic violence, which are integral parts of spouse abuse, cannot be considered criminal. Rather, it has automatically acquired criminal status because violence has been declared morally unacceptable.

Thus, the judicial system was mobilized in its role as representative of authority to stop and punish aggressors. Moreover, the idea of criminalization and judicial administration of spousal abuse had many opponents. On the other hand, the idea of establishing aid services for men with spousal abuse problems met strong opposition. This may illustrate quite clearly the moral, social and institutional polarization which states that "violent men deserve more to be punished than to be assisted."

Research did not escape this polarizing effect surrounding violence. Scientific objectivity

appeared to me at times to be a priori tainted by generally incontestable beliefs and set up as irrefutable scientific facts. It was ordered, for example, that there was only "one cause" of spousal abuse and that any other explicative element was decreed as an "associated factor", without having been demonstrated beforehand by any research. This gave birth to theoretical contexts whose foundations were not quite sound and which were based in part on ideological considerations.

With respect to the organizations and interveners working with men, ever since their inception they walled themselves within these same principles of intervention, which, from a moral point of view, were unassailable, but whose clinical application was certainly questionable. Over the years, during my activities in training, supervision and clinical intervention, I very often witnessed the difficulty counsellors experienced in trying to maintain their therapist role without assuming the functions of representative of the law or of moral guardian.

We thus witnessed a massive mobilization of an arsenal aimed at counterbalancing spousal abuse; a problem located from the start at the opposite end of the moral continuum where we find individuals who use violence by legitimizing it at the time of enactment. Those located at either end of the continuum believe their cause is just and that the means they use are legitimate.

The polarizing effect of violence

An awareness campaign launched in the Quebec media circulated the message that "Violence hurts!" Here is exactly the heart of the problem. Even though every human being has made others suffer, no one wants to suffer. Fundamentally, violence produces fear, fear of being hurt, fear of suffering.

We cannot be impassive and insensitive in face of violence. Anything that represents a threat, real or potential, to our physical or psychological integrity, necessarily calls for protective strategies that vary according to the situations and the means at our disposal.

From the point of view of the victim, potential or real, any means, including violence, are legitimate when the goal is to counter fear and pain, to "combat evil". We praise the merits of those who have the force or courage to defend themselves. We are overtaken by indignation when faced with suffering victims and by the imperious desire to compensate the harm that was caused to them.

Things become more complex on the moral plane when we observe the same reality from the point of view of the aggressor. The latter often justifies his acts from the same rationale as the eventual victim, who is perceived, justifiably or not, as a threat to his person, to his psychological, narcissistic and sometimes physical integrity. Thus, he also perceives himself as a victim, potential or real, whom he has to protect.

Who is right? Who is wrong? From a moral standpoint, we can easily answer that it is the one who acts in the name of Virtue who is right. Therefore, no matter what the position

is, we always have the impression of legitimacy when acting in the name of Virtue and of Justice.

The phenomenon becomes even more complex when we consider the situation from the perspective of the "observer", who is viscerally and morally prompted to take a position in favour of one or the other of the parties. I say viscerally because our moral position is influenced by our personal and emotional experiences in relation to violence. These experiences have shaped the way in which we come to terms with violence, whether it originates from within or from outside our Self.

It is sometimes difficult to admit, however, that in each of us coexists, at the same time, an aggressor and a victim who are inevitably solicited by the situations that we encounter or are described to us, and which prompt us to take a stand. As in theatre or cinema, where we identify more with certain characters than with others, we cannot avoid our tendency to identify with the aggressor and/or with the victim, to imagine ourselves in one place or the other, in variable positions according to the personal experience of every individual.

A problem arises when our personal experiences impede us from taking the necessary psychological distance to avoid lapsing into massive identifications that lead us to support extreme moral positions. The legitimate desire to take care of our own suffering may lead us to illegitimately do so at the expense of others by prescribing inappropriate solutions to their needs.

Our inner Self needs an "inner enemy". It seems, in fact, that we need to see the bad outside ourselves, and the thought that we ourselves could be bad is intolerable. By a mechanism of projection and denial, we manage to free ourselves from too great a feeling of guilt resulting from an aggression of the "bad self" by a merciless moral authority. Once projected on others, we can legitimately combat it and simultaneously be confirmed in our own goodness and our moral superiority.

In the same way, we would need an "inner victim". The suffering of the victim awakens compassion and the desire to take care of him/her. Such altruism attracts recognition and gratitude, in addition to reassuring us of our own value. By proxy, our impulses for solicitude also have the goal of taking care of our own suffering and to draw relief and consolation from this solicitude.

At both ends of the moral spectrum, the good and bad, we find advocates of the saying: "the end justifies the means." In both camps, very categorical and intransigent positions can be adopted.

The risks inherent in polarized moral positions

Our moral positions, as institutions and interveners involved in the problem of spousal abuse, may make it such that we may compromise reaching our objectives from the very outset. Worse yet, we may, through our views and attitudes, generate the opposite of

what we are aiming for. Paradoxically, we may end up doing a lot of harm in the name of Virtue. Though virtuous at the outset, our good intentions may not always be judicious when translated without nuance into concrete actions, when they are not freed from our personal need to do justice.

By limiting ourselves to theories ⁽²⁾which only take into account part of the factors that explain the phenomenon, and by generalizing them, we cannot structure services that are adapted to the particular situations and needs of individuals. Common sense teaches (and research is increasingly confirming this) that reality (relationships, life) is more complex than we would like to believe.

Awareness and prevention programs which convey an ideology dividing reality into two clearly opposing parts, namely "totally bad male aggressors who deserve to be punished" and "totally good and powerless female victims who deserve compassion," miss an important part of the reality of individuals, who would not recognize themselves in what is presented to them because the vast majority position themselves somewhere between those two extremes.

Also, the more moralizing the discourse becomes, the more it prompts those who feel singled out to hide and feel ashamed and apprehensive, rather than to confide in people they feel close to or to ask for help. For this reason, in some cases, the decision to consult a specialized service would only be made belatedly, in a context of legal constraint, after the situation has seriously degenerated.

The more ostracizing the position becomes, the greater the risk that spousal abuse services for men become negatively perceived by the potential clientele. "Labelled" men are more reluctant to consult, out of fear of being judged and condemned by the counsellor. They associate these services even more directly to judicial authority. In the end, it becomes difficult to establish a working alliance with some of these men, and this contributes greatly to reducing the possibilities for change.

The polarizing effect of violence is also felt in the application of a praiseworthy moral position similar to that conveyed by the slogan "zero tolerance". Born out of good intentions and very noble ambitions, such a position could bring about a "radical intolerance" against any expression of aggressiveness or anger, possibly going as far as justifying the recourse to means as drastic and damaging as those we want to eliminate.

There cannot be a morality of emotions and feelings, for we cannot attach a value judgment to a natural psycho-physiological phenomenon governed by the central nervous system, which is not controlled by our free will. To classify any expression of aggression or anger as "violence", thus making it the object of severe social disapproval, is contrary to nature. Given their primordial role in the development and expression of identity, too great a repression of aggressive affects can be likened to a denial of the being and to a violation of the right to existence, and to freedom and dignity. The history of humanity is filled with great movements, sometimes very deadly revolts, generated by authoritarian repressive regimes.

We often hear the expression "we cannot take a chance," said in a coercive tone, when talking about the security of individuals. This laudable principle may sometimes legitimize means which may cause considerable harm and damage if applied without discernment. For example, through an excess of zealousness, we may violate fundamental principles of our system of law, such as the "presumption of innocence" and the respect for the "right to privacy," and have someone arrested uselessly and wrongly. The "just in case" rule can generate situations of great injustice that nurture mistrust and legitimate revolt rather than encourage further moral reflections on violence.

In order to maximize the security of individuals, we endeavour to equip ourselves with a system that has no imperfections. We thus insist on the importance of a "partnership," of a direct collaboration between the different players to tighten the links in the net and prevent any slippage that could lead to spousal and family tragedies. Although very meritorious, this attitude has its share of perverse effects. An example of this is the triangulation of services for men by the judicial system.

Indeed, the Court's systematic referral of batterers to aid services prompts individuals to use the services strictly for legal ends. Even if it is generally possible, from a clinical point of view, to deal with this reality, we frequently trip on the impossibility of forming a therapeutic alliance.

The more we focus on exerting social control over the client-therapist relationship, the more the assistance function is weakened, and the more the possibilities of change, second offence prevention and individual security decrease. Too close an association between the judicial and the clinical fields creates a climate of mistrust, which nurtures in individuals a reluctance to consult and reduces the continuation rates in help programs.

Slogans such as "violence is unacceptable" and "nothing justifies violence" are proclaimed as absolute and morally incontestable truths. They, nevertheless, bring about their fair share of contradictions. In reality, violence can be acceptable, and may even be sometimes necessary, if its goal is to protect oneself and others. In the criminal code, it is called "self-defence," and is defined as the use of force necessary to protect one's physical integrity or to help someone in danger (the principle of the "Good Samaritan"). In this case, it constitutes an obligation under the law.

It is therefore morally accepted that women become violent in countering the violence of their partners. Thus, in this case, we would be talking of "reactionary violence." Also, the "battered woman syndrome" has already been evoked in Court to acquit a woman who had killed her violent partner.

In the name of justice also, violence becomes morally acceptable. By means of punishment, we inflict suffering in order to repair a mistake and dissuade one from making others suffer. In this case, it has to do with a kind of institutional or structural violence; "the violence of the good," which we honourably call Justice because it attacks injustice, the violence of evil.

Even if we agree that punishment can produce dissuasive effects and re-establish a certain justice vis-à-vis the victim and society, the numerous cases of recidivism demonstrate that punishment does not always achieve its goals. The subjects, whether right or wrong, rarely have the impression of being treated fairly. The more punishment hurts, the more disproportionate and unjust it appears, and the less it discourages one to do harm. Our clients often come back from their experience in the judicial system with a profound feeling of injustice and revolt, which makes it difficult and even impossible to question the fault they committed.

Beyond influencing the organizational culture of services for men with spousal abuse problems, the polarizing effects of violence also have a direct impact on therapists. Besides the ideological and institutional pressures, therapists have to deal with their own difficulties and their own personal vulnerability zones. As a front-row spectator, the therapist cannot escape the phenomenon of the identification with the aggressor and with the victim, any more than the adoption of polarized moral positions which create many therapeutic impasses.

With respect to our official mandate of "making aggressors accountable," as outlined in government policy, our moral positions lead us to "balance" between two contradictory tendencies, "over-responsibility" or "de-responsibility" placed on the aggressor, or to "confine" ourselves in one position or the other.

Historically, in my opinion, organizations and counsellors who intervene with men who perpetrate spousal abuse are located in the over-responsibility section of the spectrum. Counter-transferences of a theoretical, ideological and institutional nature have oriented intervention towards re-educative approaches. Identifying themselves more with the victim and starting off with a negative impression of the violent man, therapists have focused more on confrontation, therefore forcing these men to reveal their violence, admit their mistakes and confess their responsibility.

In this perspective, which is always current but which has acquired more nuances over the years, any attempt by the client to explain facts and situation that do not fit with the therapist's theory is perceived by the latter as a justification, a minimization or a denial of the problem. Claiming to know more about the client than the client himself, about his problem and the solutions that ought to be brought about, too often therapists have a tendency to persuade him that he is at fault and of the so-called real causes of his violence.

Yet, in this type of dynamic, attempts by the client to oppose the views of the therapist are unavoidable and often at the core of sterile and failed therapeutic interactions. This is so not only because the client is expressing resistance, but above all because the therapist persists in trying to persuade the client that he is at fault.

Theories that are too restrictive cannot stand the test of reality. They are often shaken by the complexity of situations recounted or experienced by these men. Shaken in their

convictions and forced to open themselves up to other possibilities, therapists run the risk of finding themselves confused and divided in their need to separate good from evil (the one who is right from the one who is at fault, the innocent from the guilty, and so on).

A study conducted by the CRI-VIFF (1997) about the ethical dimensions associated with the work with male batterers demonstrated that counsellors often found themselves faced with the dilemmas of attributing responsibility and loyalty. Therapists asked themselves who they should believe: their client? the client's partner? the judge? the police? their theory?

Cornered in the latter moral dilemmas, therapists end up doubting the client's responsibility regarding his violence. Won over by the impression that the client's violence was legitimate, and being sympathetic to his suffering, therapists run the risk of moving from one end of the moral spectrum to the other and to lay part of the blame for the man's violence on his partner.

By wanting to relieve the other's suffering and at the same time taking care of his own suffering, the therapist can comfort the client in his position as a victim and absolve him of his violence. Moving from the therapeutic lever of the "reproaching finger" to that the "comforting bosom" constitutes another impasse for therapy.

Conclusion

Beyond political and social considerations, one must take into account that violence has a polarizing effect on therapists. We too prefer to perceive the bad outside of ourselves and believe that we are different from our clients -- that the therapist is good and that the client is bad. Consequently, we can easily and subtly claim to be morally superior, and present ourselves to them as being pure and irreproachable on the moral plane, exempt from all aggressiveness and malice.

Relegated to an inferior echelon on the moral hierarchy, the violent individual runs the risk of feeling that he is treated from on high, judged, blamed, scorned, denied, and refused the support, understanding and respect which are indispensable to change.

From this angle, "moralization", as a discourse or a moralizing attitude, decisively appears as a form of legitimized violence that is accepted clinically and socially, under the pretence that we turn to it in the name of good. If such was the case, would we not be in the process of reproducing a relationship system that is similar to the one we want to eliminate? By responding to violence with violence? With a more sophisticated structural violence?

The inevitable counter-transferences induced by violence make it very difficult to always maintain a therapeutically neutral position. Our role as therapist entails a duty of constantly dealing with our emotional responses, to accept the discomfort brought on by moral and ethical dilemmas encountered in practice, to lean towards **a certain flexibility**, which allows us to balance between opposing positions rather than rooting ourselves

rigidly in positions which appear to be more comfortable, as often do the men who consult us for help. Through our attitude as therapists, we suggest to the men who consult us a different way of relating, different than the one they too often have known in their lives.

This so-called "therapeutic neutrality" is in itself not always desirable and can, indeed, be morally unacceptable according to certain more dogmatic points of view. What is politically correct may not be compatible with what is clinically correct. This in turn raises the interesting question of "Neutrality vs. Advocacy" raised by Goldner in 1992.

In our view, the neutral position sought by the therapist does not infringe on the security of individuals. On the contrary, by giving ourselves the necessary conditions to promote a changing process, and specifically by establishing a relationship of trust and respect with the client, we increase the possibilities of preventing second offences and, consequently, the security of individuals.

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Research at the Family Violence Project: Does it Work?

Alayne Hamilton

Abstract: *Outcome research on programs for men who use violence against women in relationships is difficult and fraught with controversy. How can a small program with limited resources meet the need of the community to be assured that the agency makes a worthwhile contribution? Alayne Hamilton will discuss some of the research dilemmas in the field and how the Family Violence Project charted a course into these rough waters. The 2001 results of the original data-gathering project will be distributed and discussed. Alayne has launched the ship of research again this year, and will describe how the new data-gathering has been informed by the experience of the last voyage. She will share recent results from the first 6 months of this study and welcome questions and discussion.*

Author: Alayne Hamilton is the executive director of the Victoria Family Violence Project, and a long-time ACAM/ERA board member.

1. A difficult field

Reference: Gondolf, Edward W., Evaluating batterer counseling programs: A difficult task showing some effects and implications. Aggression and Violent Behavior 9 (2004) 605-631

Issues:

- 1) Control groups
 - Classic random assignment to treatment and control groups raises ethical issues of withholding treatment when others are in danger and treatment is required by court order.
 - Men assigned to treatment may drop out.
 - If drop-outs are used as a control, these men may be very different from men who complete.
 - Control groups are beyond the capacity of small working agencies.
- 2) Confounding variables
 - Is it the treatment or something else that happened concurrently?
 - Most studies use subjects who have been arrested and charged.
 - Women who are supported in the process may get more power in the relationship.
 - Programs are different and change during the evaluation.
 - Counsellor characteristics may be more important than content.
- 3) Conflicts based on belief and goals
 - Does faith in men's treatment increase risk to women?
 - Is leaving the answer (short vs. long term prevention)?

- Will needed dollars be diverted from victim services to offender treatment?
 - Can men change? Evidence vs. strongly held values and beliefs.
- 4) Definitions of success
- Physical assault or use of coercion and non-physical abuse?
 - Will other forms of abuse increase if physical assault decreases?
 - Short or long term effects?
 - Who is the judge of change?
 - Are we trying to save a family?

Results:

- Gondolf reports that in the 40 published academic evaluations 50 to 80% of program completers are non-violent at the end of 6-month to 1-year periods, based on partner reports.
- All these studies are dismissed on technicalities: no control groups, selection bias, low response rates, short follow-up periods, no calculation of size of effect attributable to the program – “circumstantial evidence.”
- Calculation of effect size results in huge differences, but averaged out it is low.
- Even if effect size is 5%, this would translate to 42,000 women/year not re-assaulted.
- Cost effectiveness is also an issue; group programs are inexpensive compared to jail.
- Meta-analysis results in “no conclusive evidence that most programs are effective or that any programs are highly effective.”

However, as Gondolf notes, *“The most surprising finding in our multisite evaluation is that the vast majority of men referred to batterer counseling appear to stop their abusive behaviour and reduce their abuse in general.”*

2. First Family Violence Program (FVP) evaluation

Beginning issues in 1997:

“At first it seems so simple. But what does “work” mean? Are we trying to stop physical assaults or also verbal and psychological abuse and control, those assaults on a woman’s self esteem, dignity, and freedom? What if physical abuse has ended, but the woman is still living in fear, controlled by intimidation and threats? And does improvement count? What if a man who used to break bones now breaks cups? If a man who was frequently violent before treatment stops for several years, then on one occasion chooses to push his wife, has treatment failed? Are we justified in demanding higher standards of non-abuse for program completers than is the norm among other men in the community?”

We decided not to give up. We cannot *prove* that our program works, but we can find *indicators* of success. We will do our own data gathering with the good of clients as the highest goal.

Outcome goals:

- To stop physical abuse
- To reduce psychological abuse

- To increase women's safety.

What we learned:

(See *FVP Annual Report 2000/2001: Research Component*)

- 1) Piles of data and pages of analysis end up as one or two sentences of useful results.
- 2) Women partners provide the most conservative and convincing reports.
- 3) It is possible to demonstrate improvement among men who complete on all three indicators of success.
- 4) It is important to follow up at six months and at least another year.
- 5) It becomes extremely difficult to contact people three years after treatment.
- 6) Physical abuse and psychological abuse increase AND decrease together.
- 7) Longer attendance (in Phase II) is correlated with partners' reports of decreased psychological abuse.
- 8) The **program content** (the Tool Chest) is related to the success indicators.

3. Current 2004 research

The same three indicators are used. The goals have not changed, so the results will be comparable. Women partners who have at least weekly contact with the man rate his success. Data are gathered 3 times: at the end of Phase I, 6 months after, and 18 months after completion.

Changes and additions

- Program satisfaction and accessibility data are gathered at the end of the program.
- Do those who do not identify with mainstream culture feel we were respectful and responsive to their needs?
- May not gather data from men at 6 month and one year later follow-ups.
- Add parent rating of children's safety, emotional and physical.
- Additional questions for those referred with outstanding charges; eg women's satisfaction with referral, outcome of treatment and outcome in court.
- Intervening variables: replaced use of tools taught in program to ratings of "Behavioural indicators of Change in Abusive Men", which is used as the basis of MCFD reports.

4. A 6-month report on the 2004 project

Interviews:

- 20 men who have completed 16 weeks of treatment
- 19 women partners
- 54% of eligible subjects.

Program satisfaction:

- 100% report that the counsellors treated them with respect and responded to their needs.

87.5% of women (in contact) say they feel safer as a result of his attendance.
67% of women (with children) say the children are safer (physically and emotionally).

Positive comments: “He has learned to talk to me” “I feel safer because I left” “When he gets angry he takes a time-out” “Children are not hearing threats” “He is learning his behaviour is wrong” “He stopped shouting at us. He can stop himself” “This service is needed in society. It’s not OK that you have to live in a violent situation.”

October 20, 2004

HomeFront: Calgary's Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Violence and Specialized Domestic Violence Court

Kevin McNichol

***Abstract:** Attendees were provided an overview of HomeFront's development, focusing on collaboration amongst its key partner agencies and the unique procedures used in the specialized court process. Highlights from the four-year independent evaluation were also shared. Special attention was paid to the court team units, including the Crown, Legal Aid, Probation, Police, and Caseworker (victim support) offices that have come together creating a coordinated community response to domestic violence and have led to a 2/3 reduction in recidivism for domestic violence offences over the last 4 years.*

Author: Kevin McNichol, MSc, RSW, is the Court Team Manager for HomeFront in Calgary.

Please refer to attached FinalCopyAddition2.ppt for the PowerPoint presentation.

A Short History of the Prevention of Woman Abuse in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Mario Payarola

***Abstract:** The following paper describes the evolution of programs for the prevention of women abuse in Buenos Aires, Argentina, emphasizing the hazardous implementation of programs for abusive men, from an ecological point of view. It points out the deficiencies in the macrosystems and exo-systems, and proposes the possible solutions to these deficiencies.*

Author: Mr. Mario Payarola (Psychologist-Bachelor degree in 1977- University of Buenos Aires) - Awardee of the Canadian Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1996 and 2000.

Professor of the subject “Programs for abusive men” in the Interdisciplinary Career on Domestic Violence, University of Buenos Aires, 2002/2004.

The board of directors of the Ending Relationship Abuse Society of B.C. would like to extend our sincere thanks to Mr. Payarola for submitting this article for the proceedings. Our hope was that he would be able to attend the conference in person, but since this was not possible we are pleased to offer you his insights in this article.

Introduction

After seven years of military dictatorship, Argentine society recovered democracy as a way of life. The dictatorship left terrible wounds in society, mostly because of the criminal actions of the military government towards the population. They kidnapped people, created concentration camps and killing fields, and invented the term “desaparecidos” which means the ones who are “missing”, referring to those that were killed. Human rights were violated day by day during seven years. In that context nobody was able to speak out because one was threatened with death.

Development

With the return of democracy in 1983, people felt great relief. The first elected government decided to charge the military responsible for the violation of Human Rights during the dictatorship.

In changing the living conditions and with the standing of the Constitution, it was possible to speak out about domestic violence in general, mentioning the vulnerable populations: children, women and elders. In 1984 the first courses on domestic violence began to be offered by two psychologists, Mrs. Cristina Vila and Jorge Corsi. These courses were taught at different general hospitals and non-profit organizations.

In 1988 a well known boxer (world champion), killed his wife by pushing her from a balcony, after beating her. This death brought the issue of battered women out in the public. At that time this was an issue only spoken of by the two professionals mentioned in very limited audiences. After the death of this woman, there were TV programs and many other media (newspapers, radios, etc.) speaking about woman abuse. It is important to mention to a Canadian public that there was no feminist movement during the seventies as in many other countries, mostly because of the dictatorship already mentioned.

The first democratic government created a Women's Secretary with the intention of promoting women's equality. In 1988, with their support, a First Conference on Woman Abuse was held in the city of Chapadmalal. The conference showed that many organizations around the country provided services to protect women from violence, and they are still multiplying everywhere. Unfortunately the services for abusive men did not multiply in the same way until 1990.

One important event was the creation of an Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Career in Domestic Violence at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires in 1989. The proposal of this career was an initiative of Mr. Jorge Corsi (Psychologist), who had been an awardee of the Canadian Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1988. This award allowed him to deepen his knowledge of domestic violence in Canada.

One of the subjects of this career is "Programs for abusive men", and at that moment none of these programs existed. As a means of studying these programs, Mr. J. Corsi started the first program at a general hospital (dependent on the Municipality of Buenos Aires), facilitated by himself and another psychologist. This initiative was meant to offer a community service along with professional training for the students of the post-graduate career. After a year or so, the groups continued in another building, still depending on the Municipality of Buenos Aires city. It also created a 24-hour phone number, and other services for women, as legal advice and groups for battered women. So the three services - phone, women and men's groups - were intended to work in coordination.

By 1994 the political authorities ended the men's groups and dismissed the professional team, but continued with the other two services. In order to continue offering the services for men, Mr Corsi decided to continue with the program in another non-profit organization who graciously rented their place once a week.

In 1995 I ended my post-graduate career and was offered work in this organization. I first started with intake interviews and progressively was incorporated into the groups, first as an observer and later as a facilitator.

In 1997, we started our own non-profit organization and rented a house, thanks to the financial support of a German organization that helps Third World Countries in different programs. At that time Mr. J. Corsi and myself facilitated three groups. We decided to work by proposing three stages, each one with different goals. The groups were designed in an open format; that is to say that men can enter the group and pass to another stage as

soon as they reach certain goals. Men were referred mostly by other women's non-profit organizations and only 20% of them from the Justice Courts. The contents of the program had been taken from Canadian literature, adapting them to our culture, and had a pro-feminist stance as suggested by David Adams.

The Exo-systems

a) Justice

The first law for the protection of victims of family violence was sanctioned by December, 1994. This law is included in the Civil Code. It allows Family Judges to exclude the abusive man from his home, but there are no legal sanctions. The judges can suggest that men attend a program for abusive men, but it is not mandatory. The government does not provide these programs. They are held in non-profit organizations, which at the moment are only three. This means practically nothing in the three million population of Buenos Aires city. This is due to a lack of a federal government policy towards domestic violence.

There have been discussions with representatives about including domestic violence in the Criminal Code but the controversy still continues. Some are against this idea because the State will have to provide programs for abusive men in an economic context of "default", and they believe the State will not be able to finance them.

b) University students

As a Professor I have found interest in the students in acquiring a knowledge of this field of specialty, although there is no guarantee that they will be able to sometime facilitate groups. There are no job offers for them at the moment, unless they create their own non-profit organizations with other colleagues or offer their services in organizations already created.

c) Other professionals in the field

There are many professionals working in the field without any special training from the University. In them I have found a lack of interest in programs for abusive men. They are fond of working with victims rather than abusers. There are many prejudices towards abusive men, one of which is that people believe they won't change their behaviour and so it is useless to do something for them. These biases are also heard in the general population; I think it is because media show only the terrible cases where the abusive men are psychopaths. They also believe that abusive men only deserve to be in jail for their crimes.

Conclusions

From an ecological point of view (Bronfrenbrenner) we may arrive at the following conclusions in order to evaluate the present situation of programs for abusive men in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In the macrosystem our recent history of political and social violence is deeply rooted in many people who still believe that violence is a way of solving conflicts. Since the return

of democracy (1983) there has not been a stable public policy towards the prevention of domestic violence.

In the exo-system the lack of the inclusion of domestic violence in the Criminal Code gives abusive men the chance of being violent without being legally sanctioned, and the existing Civil Law does not oblige men charged with violence to attend programs. At the same time the government is not compelled to provide services for men, leaving such programs in the hands of non-profit organizations who are free to provide them without guidelines and standards. In this way the possibility of multiplying efficient programs for men becomes a personal effort of specialized professionals and non-profit organizations.

Contrary to this, if there was a public policy towards prevention of domestic violence, along with the inclusion of abusive behaviour as a crime, the State would be obliged to provide services for men. It would also be obliged to support these services financially and to give general guidelines for the organizations to follow.

Note about the author

In 1996 I won my first award at the Canadian Embassy in Buenos Aires in order to study domestic violence in Canada (during four weeks), and traveled to Canada in September. I visited Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver. In Ottawa I visited the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence and interviewed a professional who guided me in visiting different organizations. In Vancouver I visited the B.C. Institute Against Family Violence. I also met Mrs. Ester Frid and Mr. John Daly who were running a program for Spanish speaking men; they gave me a video which I still use in some of my lectures and classes ("From father to son"). I learned a lot speaking with Mr. Dale Trimble about his experience in working with abusive men in Canada and he also handed me a video which has been very useful for my studies.

In 2000 I won my second award at the Canadian Embassy and planned my visit in October, so I could attend to the First National Conference in Victoria. Thanks to Jan Robson and Tracy Seddon I could speak about my short experience with abusive men in Buenos Aires.

In 2002, when I was offered the subject "Programs for abusive men" in the Interdisciplinary Post-graduate Career in Domestic Violence at the University of Buenos Aires, I introduced in the teaching program the Harry Stefanakis and Anne Davidson article "The Transtheoretical Model of Change", and also the E.R.A. Guiding Principles which I myself have translated into Spanish.

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Life-Course Development of Reformed Maritally Violent Men: Preliminary Results

Yuriko Riesen

Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to uncover: (a) reformed maritally violent men's own accounts of how they developed through life, and (b) how and why these men stopped being maritally violent. A life story was collected in telephone interviews from reformed maritally violent men. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed. In this session, Dan's (pseudonym) life-story will be discussed in depth. Dan is an American with aboriginal background. His story will reveal the major turning points in his life, and how they transformed him from a chemically dependent, aggressive man to a devoted counsellor.*

Author: Yuriko Riesen is a PhD student in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education at UBC.

Background

How do boys grow up to be maritally violent? How do maritally violent men reform themselves and become violence-free? Little is known. As far as the roots of marital violence go, evidence indicates that there is a link between childhood variables (e.g., witnessing interparental violence) and adulthood manifestation of marital violence (Whitefield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Currently available research is predominantly correlational. Such research informs one of what childhood factors are related to marital violence; however, it cannot reveal how and why these factors contribute to marital violence. Likewise, most studies that examined men's cessation of marital violence were quantitative. In general, these studies measured violence at pre- and post-treatment to evaluate success of a particular intervention. In other words, they aimed to examine what would work to change men. Reviews of these studies (Riesen, 2003; Rosenfeld, 1992) indicate, however, that there exist serious methodological shortcomings: large attrition rates, low response rate at follow-ups. Thus, the majority of currently available research cannot adequately inform one of which particular intervention works, to say the least of how and why. In order for this field of research to advance, questions of how and why need to be examined. Reviews of intervention studies with maritally violent men (Riesen; Rosenfeld) suggest that a study using a developmental perspective and qualitative methodology appears to be promising in order to examine the roots and cessation of marital violence. Information from this study has the potential to impact on the development of intervention programs for maritally violent men. In addition, the study will contribute to the field of research on life-course development of men in the context of marital violence.

Objectives

The purpose of the study was to uncover: (a) reformed maritally violent men's own accounts of how they developed through life, and (b) how and why these men stopped being maritally violent.

Method

A life story was collected in telephone and face-to-face interviews from six reformed maritally violent men. These men were recruited in Canada and the U.S. through media advertisements and referrals from practitioners (e.g., psychologists, counsellors, social workers, community advocates, probation officers) who worked with maritally violent men. The men: (a) were aged approximately 30 to 60 years, (b) had been physically abusive toward their female intimate partners more than once a year for a total of at least two years, and (c) have not been physically abusive to female partners for the last two years. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed. The interview questions were derived from the protocol developed by McAdams (1988, 1993).

Results

Presented below is Dan's (pseudonym) life-story. Dan was an American with aboriginal background. His story revealed the major turning points in his life, and how they transformed him from a chemically dependent, aggressive man to a devoted family counsellor. In the following summary of Dan's life-story, his actual words were used and linked together by the author of this article.

Dan's life-story

Early Years

I was born in the States in the mid 1950s. I am half Polynesian and half Caucasian-Native American. I was adopted when I was three years old. My adopted father was Native American, and my adopted mother was Caucasian. My father was always a good provider, but had a drinking problem. To my mother he sometimes became verbally abusive. A couple of times, he was also physically abusive to her. To me and my two siblings, he was emotionally distant. My mother was very loving and dearly attached to us. I got along with my teachers all right, but not with my peers. They bullied me and I knew why that was. It was because of my colour.

Early Teenage Years

But it all changed, believe me, once my body started to grow bigger in Grade 4. All the neighbourhood kids were now smaller than me. They didn't pick on me any more because I just started to beat them up. At the same time, I started to hang around with some Mexican kids who were as big as I was. We were smoking and playing with prescription drugs and what-not.

Dark Years

During my teenage years, I was getting more and more attracted to the tough guys' images, and that got me in a lot of trouble. My parents were separated when I was 16.

Shortly afterwards, I ended up moving in with this old man. Everything went worse from then on. That was my turning point, a massively negative one for sure. This man was 40 years old; a pretty tough guy, a gangster type, and a heroin user. At that time, I thought I was a grown man and knew what I was doing. I was introduced to heroin and got addicted. In order to support my addiction, I engaged in criminal activities and got arrested. For the next 20 years, I was in and out of prison. Whenever I got out of prison, I hung around with those men and women who were also using and drinking. Those men I was with didn't treat their women with respect; They became physically and emotionally abusive toward their women in order to have their own ways I treated my girlfriends in the same way; I was verbally abusive. I thought that that was normal. As far as my physical violence went, I was twice physically violent to Sheila (pseudonym), my then girlfriend. I was about 20. The second time when I hurt her, I really made up my mind never to physically hurt a woman again. Never! When I finally realised how much physical damage I could do to her, something did change in me. Since then, I was never physically violent to women, even when women became physically aggressive and verbally nasty to me, and even when I was drunk.

The biggest turning point in my life came to me like this. That was when I was doing my fifth prison term. Just to break the monotony, I participated in a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. At this meeting, there were two men that came in. I knew them, especially one of them very well. We used to shoot up heroin together and do a lot of criminal activities together. But now he wore clean clothes and was clean-shaven and he had this look in his eyes, like, I don't know what it was, but I wanted it. I wanted it badly. It was very attractive. I talked to him after the meeting and he said to me, "You know what, Dan, you don't have to live this way no more, if you don't want to." At that time I didn't have any clue what he was talking about. But after a few more years, when I was still doing the same old stuff I was doing, those words came to me so clear. I started to ask myself, "Why am I doing this?" I came to realise that I was getting really tired of doing my prison time and that I was not living my life, so to speak. The main problem was my using and drinking. So, I started to reach out to do something different. During my last prison term, I got involved with a drug recovery program.

New Life

While in prison, I started to participate in the purification ceremonies in the sweat lodge. I went to a ceremony once a week throughout the months. During the ceremonies, it became clear to me what I really wanted in life. I wanted to live a life that is free from drug usage and criminal activity. I really wanted to change! I wanted to become a better human being. I came to believe that that's what the Creator wants me to do. Through the ceremonies the Creator showed me my healing path. I became aware of what I really was. Those were the most significant times of my life.

I got out of prison in 1992, and continued thinking deeply of a life of recovery. I stayed involved with the drug recovery program, and kept going to the ceremonies. I also started to work in construction. I met Jody (pseudonym), my current partner, and we started to live together.

Around 1995, my counsellor suggested that I should apply for a job as a co-ordinator of a domestic violence prevention program. It resulted in one of the first Native Americans' domestic violence program in the States, which I'm very proud of.

Because I was doing this work and also because I hadn't been physically violent to women for a long time, I thought I was OK. But the most profound learning experience as a man, advocate, and counsellor came from Jody, my partner. One day after a year and a half since I started my work, she sat me down and talked about how I would become loud and intimidating to her when we argued over something. To tell the truth, I had never realised that I was verbally abusive to her during those moments. I never knew what I was doing. From that day on, I really started to look at myself and make a real conscious effort to change my behaviour. I came to realise that I had been still violent, though not in a physical way. Nowadays, when Jody and I have a heated discussion, I am very aware of my emotional state; how my voice is and how my body language is. I never go there now; I stop before I become threatening and intimidating. And I share this learning with my groups of Native men. To many men, treating women as I was treating Jody has become their second nature. But, that's not the way it should be. I tell them that's not how the Creator wants men to relate to women.

Becoming Violent

Looking back on my life and trying to figure out how I became violent in intimate relationships, I could see how I had learned it from men around me. My adopted father and all other men around me treated their women in the same way; without respect. It was as if they had permission to use violence on women in order to have the last word. All adult men around me believed in that.

Future

My purpose of my life is to help with ones with the similar background, who came from a dark past, to show them that we are capable of change. I came into this world to help men and women turn from using and drinking, and change their lives. I know there are hundreds and hundreds of people that need it. I now know that that's what the Creator wants me to do. My dream? When I look back and see myself sitting in a prison cell 20 years ago, now is the dream. My dream of those dark days came true and now I am living in it. When I say to others, "Peace be with you," I really mean it. I really mean it because I know how it is not to live without peace in oneself. I was living without peace for so many years.

Discussion

Although Dan's life-story explored several important developmental themes, such as (a) developmental continuities (e.g., growing up as a coloured man), (b) turning points, (c) the effects of a certain time and place on developing individuals (e.g., growing up in a time of easily available drugs), and (d) interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, teachers, girlfriends), the remaining section of this article will discuss mainly the origin and cessation of his marital violence. The analysis and

discussion of his whole life-story, as well as those of the rest of the five participants, can be found elsewhere (Riesen, 2005).

Origin of marital violence

According to Dan, he learned to be violent in intimate relationships as the result of witnessing interparental violence and interacting with those “tough” men who were around him during the first 30 years of his life. This result is consistent with: a) Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory, and b) previous correlational studies that showed that those boys who witnessed interparental violence were more likely to grow up to become abusive husbands compared to their counterparts who did not witness such violence (Bevan & Higgins, 2002; Kalmuss, 1984; Markowitz, 2001; McBurnett et al., 2001; Murphy, Meyer, & O’Leary, 1993; Rosenbaum & O’Leary, 1981; Whitefield et al., 2003). According to Dan, his verbal abusiveness to intimate partners became so natural to him that it was almost his second nature.

Cessation of physical violence

Dan’s decision to stop being physically violent to an intimate partner was made in a split second. The realisation that he had physical force strong enough to kill a person came to him as if he was hit by thunder. Since then, he has never been physically violent to women. Natural change such as this has not been documented in the literature. The reason for this may be that previous intervention studies of cessation of marital violence have focused exclusively on men’s change facilitated by extrinsic factors such as counselling or legal sanctions including arrest.

Cessation of verbal/emotional abuse

Although the present study’s focus was on cessation of physical violence, Dan shared his experiences of cessation of verbal abuse to his intimate partner. According to Dan, he was counselled by his partner whom he described as courageous. As one practitioner in the field commented (J. Robson, personal communication, November 6, 2004), it is not common for abusive men to listen to their partners and change their abusive behaviours as a result of input from them. Dan himself explained the reason for his total acceptance of his partner’s words as follows: a) he anticipated that she would leave him unless he changed, and b) his desire to become a good counsellor/co-ordinator in the family violence prevention program was so strong that he was willing to acknowledge his abusiveness and take it as a chance to improve himself.

Spirituality and change

Dan’s spiritual connection to his Creator was the source of his reformation. The contribution of spirituality to men’s change has been largely ignored in the literature of marital violence, with a few exceptions (e.g., Tello, 1998). Dan’s story was in accordance with Tello’s thesis that spirituality is a critical element in the healing processes of men, particularly, men of colour.

Acknowledgements

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DRAFT - FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES

Guidelines for Working with Couples: Screening for Violence and Safe Practices after Violence

Dale Trimble

Abstract: *When is couples therapy ethical and safe when one person has used violence or abuse in the relationship? Couples therapy has been a hot political issue in the field of working with men's use of violence in relationships. How can we avoid being driven by ideology, yet remain vigilant to issues of oppression and safety? How do we assess for violence and risk? How should you deal with a return to violence (i.e. a "relapse") when you thought it was safe? What rituals or processes can be helpful in the healing process when one person has used violence or abuse? What kinds of screening questions or instruments can be used at intake? If a man has completed a group program does this mean anything? What are the indicators of health in a man who has used violence? What about "mutual violence" and "husband battering?" Can we separate truth, perception, and politics? If you are working with a gay or lesbian couple what changes and what doesn't? This discussion will explore these questions and others in the spirit of e.e. cummings: "Always the beautiful answer that asks a more beautiful question."*

Author: Dale Trimble has been working in Vancouver with men who have assaulted their partners since 1977, and has presented thought-provoking workshops at many of the B.C. Association of Counsellors of Abusive Men's conferences over the years. He is a therapist in private practice.

The following guidelines are inspired by on an article by Michele Bograd & Fernando Mederos¹ (1999). Their questions, some inspired by Alan Jenkins and my own, are interwoven in this article. Using Bograd's & Mederos's structure as a base I have added from my own experiences and practice in working with men's violence since 1977. I welcome comments and feedback that can contribute to effective protocols for the application of couples therapy in relationships where one person has used abuse or violence to subjugate another.

These guidelines are developed in the context of the Violence Against Women in Relationships Intervention Programs for Men - Guiding Principles For Services In British Columbia (1999). It is highly recommended that the reader familiarize themselves with these principles that are available on the Internet at www.acam.bc.ca.

¹ Battering and Couples Therapy: Universal Screening and Selection of Treatment Modality, Michele Bograd & Fernando Mederos, Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, July 1999, Vol. 25, No. 3, 291-312

Safety is always the first concern. This means safety from physical harm, threats of harm and the use of psychological, economic, sexual and other forms of abuse that are used instrumentally by one person to dominate another.

These guidelines are developed in the context of the author's experience of over 25 years in working with male perpetrators of violence and abuse toward their female partners. The author has also trained in a variety of treatment approaches to couples therapy. Most recently he has completed extensive training in Emotionally Focused Therapy with couples as developed by Les Greenburg and Sue Johnson. (See www.eft.ca for further information.)

The author acknowledges that violence and the use of power and control can be female to male. A future section of these guidelines will cover this issue and some of the unique dynamics related to this. Since the great majority of intimate partners who are killed or seriously injured or fear for their life and that of their children are female, this report will focus on men as perpetrators and women as victims.

In addition, when working with a distinct culture or ethnic group issues on relationship, equality and family integrity can be viewed differently. It is important that these views and values be taken into account when working with these groups. It is especially important that a dominant view or practice that may be seen as helpful with a white middle class Canadian woman not be assumed to be in the interests of all women. For these reasons a separate section to these guidelines that provides guidelines on respecting ethnic integrity and diversity will be added at a later date.

These guidelines are also developed in the context of heterosexual relationships. Many of the guidelines will apply to Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Trans-gendered persons. However, there are also unique issues pertaining to these groups. A separate section will be needed for the LGBT communities that can alert professionals to the particular forms that domination can take in these communities and the myths that can reduce the effectiveness of a professional.

Assumptions

Thirty percent of women currently or previously married have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence at the hands of a marital partner. Women are almost 8 times more likely to be victimized by a spouse than are men (Stats Can, 1999). Due to this frequency of violence in intimate relationships, all couples that seek therapy together should be screened for violence and abuse.

It is not possible to do effective couples therapy when one person is afraid to discuss certain issues.

Couples therapy should never be conducted when it might increase risk to one party.

Reasons couples seek therapy

1. The relationship is in distress and each person is feeling the need for change. Violence and abuse is not and has not been an issue.
2. The woman is hoping that if she agrees to couples therapy she can get her partner into therapy to look at and change his abusive behaviour. She is hoping to hand him off to a counsellor.
3. The man has agreed to attend couples work and not individual or “anger management” therapy because “it takes two to tangle.” He has not taken responsibility for his behaviour and is seeking a therapist who will help his wife with “her problem.”
4. The man has attended or is attending group and/or individual counselling for violence and abuse. He has taken responsibility for his behaviour, stopped violence and abuse and understood the impact on her and other family members. She feels safer and sees his changes. Each person is now choosing to enter couples therapy to resolve relationship issues. Some of these issues will pertain to the impact of the history of abuse and violence upon each person, the family and the relationship.
5. He has attended a treatment program for this behaviour. However, not much has changed in terms of his attitudes toward her. His violence may or may not have stopped. Psychological abuse continues. He may be saying to her, “I did my part now you have to work on your issues.”

Dynamics to remember

Couples may feel less ashamed to come for marital therapy than “batterers groups” and “battered women’s support groups.”

A man may increase violence or control when emotions become strong as a result of couples therapy and the relationship becoming more out of his control.

Some say that couples work should never been used once violence is identified, regardless of the form, frequency, severity or power dynamics in the relationship. Women who feel coerced to accept the title “battered woman” or the statement “men never change and will get worse” may choose to never seek help again. In the long run this can increase risk to her and her children. Men who are given a choice to attend a “batterers group” or be implicitly labelled as resistant or in denial may be lost due to a lack of engagement by a helping person. Again, this can increase risk in the long run.

In some couples where the man is using violence and abusive behaviour the relationship may appear ordinary and the man affable and kind.

It is important to always screen for violence and control.

Therapists should assume that risk for violence is present in all couples until it is ruled out.

Process

1. An initial screening interview with the couple.
2. Separate interviews with each partner.

This may result in

1. Referral to separate counselling for each person first
2. Couples counselling with an explicit contract around cessation of violence
3. Couples counselling with simultaneous referral of the perpetrator for help with violence.
4. Couples counselling as usual since violence has been ruled out.

Definition

It is extremely important for you to be clear in your own mind what you define as violence, abuse and power and control. If you are not clear then your clients will be even more confused.

The central question is,

Has violence or psychological abuse occurred and does it constitute a relationship in which one person is exerting power and control over the other?

Physical violence does not equal a concern over power and control unless it,

1. Serves to enhance control of the other
2. Leads the woman to modify her behaviour or daily life
3. Includes psychological abuse
4. Instills fear and intimidation (Bograd and Mederos, 2000).

Even moderate violence (pushing, shoving or a slap) should be considered power and control (P & C) if it happens in the context of psychological abuse or coercion.

A single act of violence without psychological abuse may not constitute P & C.

Severe violence within battering relationships can include

1. Repeated or frequent acts of moderate violence
2. Frequent destruction of property
3. Sexual coercion through threats of violence or rape
4. Any act of violence that causes injury
5. Frequent & severe psychological abuse (Bograd and Mederos, 1999).

Preconditions of assessment

Couples therapy should only be undertaken if the man is a voluntary participant or not court ordered, since the violence may be more severe and his motivation is questionable. Furthermore it is the wrong message in terms of responsibility to require her participation for him to complete a court requirement.

Also men required to attend anger management under a child protection condition should be excluded from marital counselling until they have completed that counselling and been

assessed as per the following guidelines.

Confidentiality

Keeping secrets in couples therapy is required in situations of violence for her safety.

Her secrecy is not pathology or dysfunction, but is essential to her self-protection.

In her individual assessment the therapist should say that material from the interview will be kept private until she feels she is ready to bring it up in a couples session. Even if she says she is OK with the information being used in therapy the therapist should be cautious about this disclosure. If the assessment determines that it is not a relationship of P & C then the therapist should encourage the client to share information and issues with the spouse in a couples session. The therapist can offer their support in doing this.

Therapist reactions

Women who have been assaulted by their partner often will not talk openly, may not feel safe discussing fear, and may downplay risk. A useful question may include, “Has he told you what to say or not say to me?” or “Are you worried about what might be done if you let me know how bad it is?”

The woman’s fear or rage may be overwhelming or off-putting.

Even careful assessment may not reveal a power and control relationship or a risk for violence initially, causing a therapist to doubt perceptions or competency when it comes up later.

Therapists can experience extreme anger, disbelief, fear and betrayal. They may feel betrayed and tricked by a man they had begun to like or resentful toward a woman who they felt they had established a trusting working relationship with who then returns to a dangerous man.

These are normal and natural reactions that can be intensified by the therapist’s own history of victimization or use of power and control.

Some therapists’ fears are well founded and suggest accurate intuition. The root of the word intuition is “there,” which means to guard or protect.

It is wise to not be in the office alone with a couple or individual who you are in the assessment phase with, park in well lighted areas, walk to your car with colleagues, and alert others of your travel plans, ETA, etc.

As a therapist you need to be clear about responsibility and problems with violence regardless of the reason. You can present suggestions.

“If you hurt someone, you drive them away and risk destroying the relationship.”
“You may feel justified every time you (insert aggressive or controlling behaviour). That’s not uncommon. But will focusing on what she should have done differently help you to prepare to be the kind of partner you would like to be?”
“Should it be her job to be careful what to say or do so you won’t respond in a way that frightens her or should it be your job?”
“Have you been successful in convincing her to talk or behave differently?”
“What impact is your attempt to make it her job to handle your feelings having on the kind of marriage you want to have?”

Limits must be caringly but directly presented to the man. An attitude of friendly and supportive skepticism is helpful.

“Are you sure you’re prepared to practise this safety plan? It won’t be easy?”
“What if she puts you down or calls you names if you attempt it?”

Sequence of the assessment

Research says that the majority of couples who experience violence do not disclose the man’s abuse in early sessions with a therapist. 2/3 of couples presenting do not report violence until direct questions are asked, due to embarrassment, fear, shame, minimization, or his demand that she not talk about it.

Hold one couples meeting first. Avoid direct questions about violence in this session. Hold individual meetings after. My preference is to see her first if I suspect violence at all. Explain that individual meetings are standard and it allows each person to tell his or her story without interruption.

First couples session questions that can be useful in assessing for power and control include some of the following: How is affection expressed in their relationship or is it? Do they have sex? Who initiates? How are decisions made; i.e. where to live, vacations, purchases, etc. Who controls the money? How are decisions made in regard to raising children? When they feel close what’s happening? What does each see as the issue? If the counselling is successful what will be happening?

Individual meetings

I prefer to meet with her first if I suspect the presence of abuse and violence in their relationship.

Interview with woman

“What were your thoughts and feelings about our first couple’s session?” This can uncover statements like, “We didn’t really talk about the problem,” or “He was mad when we got home because of some of what I told you.”

These responses provide a chance to probe for details: “What do you want from coming

in for counselling?”

Standard questions that introduce aggression in a non-threatening manner

“In every family people get angry. What do you do when angry?”

Remember that women who have been assaulted by their partner often will not talk openly, may not feel safe discussing fear, and may downplay risk. A useful question may include, “Has he told you what to say or not say to me?” “Are you worried about what might be done if you let me know how bad it is?” It may take some time to develop rapport and an alliance before she can trust you with her fears.

“Have either of you ever thrown something, slammed a door, or broken something in anger?” Probe for details, what was happening, what did you do then, how did she respond, etc. “Has he ever grabbed, shaken, pushed or slapped you?” “Have you used aggression toward him? What was the context? What was your intent at the time? How did he respond?”

“Have you ever called the police? How did they respond? Would you call again?: “Has he ever been charged or does he have a criminal record?” “Are you aware of any of his past relationships and whether he was violent in them?”

“Did he pressure you to come in for couples therapy?”

“Has he ever threatened you in any way? Are you afraid of him?”

Warn first and again about your duty to report before pursuing these questions. “How is he with the children? Has he ever been abusive in any way toward any of the children? Have they seen or heard the fights or arguments? How have they responded?” “Does he respect you sexually? Ever abuse you in any way? Not take no for an answer?” “If he’s abusive or violent is he the same if others are present?”

If some abuse, violence or fear has been identified use the Strauss Conflict Tactics Scale, Six Kinds of Abuse (Trimble), Marshall, Tolman or Campbell’s Danger Assessment. Use these same instruments with the man also.

If you don’t use any inventory or instrument for measuring violence then use questions of **First, Worst, Typical, Last;**

- What was the first time he used violence?
- What was the worst?
- What is a typical incident?
- What was the last?

Also explain the different forms of abuse and violence and ask her what she has experienced and done in each category. Distinguish between violence that is used in self-defense and violence that is used instrumentally to control the other.

Forms of Abuse to explore if no standard inventory is used include:

- Physical
- Sexual
- Psychological/Emotional
- Economic
- Spiritual
- Destruction of Property or Pets.

Let her know that no therapy can guarantee her safety and protection and that of her children.

Use “response-based questions” and avoid “effects-based questions.” Ask questions about her responses to his violence and abuse as opposed to questions about how his behaviour has made her feel or how it has affected her. This approach can aid tremendously in her ability to see herself as a person who responds rather than a passive victim who is weak. See “Coming to Terms with Violence and Resistance: From a Language of Effects to a Language of Responses” by Nick Todd, & Allan Wade (date and source unavailable at present).

There is a need to assess whether the woman can choose couples work freely and safely. Assess her depression, suicide, and any “post-traumatic” responses. Does she use or abuse alcohol or drugs? How does this influence risk? Does he pressure her to use?

Does she have a safety plan? “What have you tried to keep yourself safe? What has worked?” “Can you use your plan if you need it?” Provide numbers for women’s shelters and/or support services. Always ask if she is willing to call these places. They are not a resource if she is reluctant or unwilling to use them.

“Who knows about the violence/abuse? How have they responded? Who are your supports? Are you aware of your legal rights?”

Always include in your interview with her questions about the good in him or the relationship. “What are his most positive qualities? What did you fall in love with? Are you still in love?” If you don’t make room for her to share the positive you increase the risk that you will lose her as a client if she doesn’t leave or returns to him. This also helps her to feel that you accept her as a whole person who has conflicting feelings and needs.

Lethality Assessment

One of the best indicators of high lethality is her sense of danger and risk. But highly traumatized women may minimize the risk.

Seven High Risk Factors (Bograd & Mederos, 2000)

- Substance abuse
- History of violence
- History of violent crimes and previous violations of restraining orders

- Use of weapons
- Threats
- Obsession with partner – includes extreme jealousy, cannot accept her independence, uses surveillance, frequent phone calls, fascination or obsession with past boyfriends, isolation from friends, family or services, demands to keep her cell on at all times
- Bizarre forms of violence – sleep deprivation, abuse of animals, locking in room, aggression during sex or demand to have sex in painful or humiliating ways, etc.

Restraining orders and their problems

Professionals, lay counsellors and the criminal justice system often strongly encourage a woman to obtain a restraining order to protect her and her children from a violent partner. After interviewing a woman as part of this assessment process you may be tempted to strongly recommend that she seek a restraining order. This may or may not be a safe response. Gavin De Becker (1997)² critiques the knee-jerk application of restraining orders to all cases of violence in relationship. He says, “Restraining orders are most effective on the reasonable person who has a limited emotional investment. They work on the person least likely to be violent anyway.”(p. 188). He suggests that there is only one good reason to get a restraining order and that is that the woman believes that her partner will respect it and leave her alone. De Becker goes on to quote a San Diego study in which about half of 170 stalking cases where the woman had obtained a restraining order the women felt that the order made things worse.

A single risk factor from the above rules out couples work, even when previous physical abuse is absent or minimal.

There is, of course, a duty to warn potential victims and police if you have reason to believe a person will commit an act of violence.

Tell the woman of your perception of risk if he appears extremely dangerous. It may not be new to her but it can be very helpful to have her view confirmed by an “expert.”

You can ask, “Have you ever thought of taking justice into your own hands? Do you have any plans to do this? Are you concerned you might act on them?”

Interview with man

“What were your thoughts and feelings about our first couples session?” This can uncover statements like, “She’s always blaming me. I get so fed up with it,” or “I’m hoping she’ll attend long enough to get the help she needs. I guess you can see what I’m dealing with.” These responses provide a chance to probe for details. “What do you want from coming in for counselling?” Look for a focus on “her need to change” or “get her some help.” These can suggest a lack of responsibility on his part and a need to focus

² De Becker, G. (1997). *The gift of fear: survival signals that protect us from violence*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co

on her behaviour so as to keep the focus away from his behaviour. At the same time it is important to not discount his view of her problems, but use it as an opportunity to explore his responses to her.

Standard questions that introduce aggression in a non-threatening manner

“In every family people get angry. What do you do when angry?” “Have you ever thrown something, slammed a door, or broken something in anger?” Probe for details, what was happening, what did you do then, how did she respond, etc. “Have you ever grabbed, shaken, pushed or slapped your partner? How did she respond?”

If he argues that she is the violent one and not he, ask him who is most afraid and who has done or could do the most damage. Don’t minimize the emotional pain he may have felt as a result of her aggression. Explore this pain and ask if he is making the choices he is proud of in response to her. What is his intent in the way he responds? It is important to put a priority on safety and his responsibility while also working to keep your alliance with him intact.

The relationship may be one where she verbally attacks and eventually physically assaults him. Then he uses his strength and power to stop the fight and possibly exact revenge. Make room to talk about what it feels like when she hurts him, how it gets to him emotionally and how he may become afraid of a fit getting out of control so he exerts his power then, but in a way that may demean and frighten her.

If some abuse, violence or fear has been identified, use the Strauss Conflict Tactics Scale, Six Kinds of Abuse (Trimble), Marshall Tolman or Campbell’s Danger Assessment etc. Use the same instruments that you use with her with the man also.

If you don’t use any inventory or instrument for measuring violence then use questions of **First, Worst, Typical, Last:**

- What was the first time he used violence?
- What was the worst?
- What is a typical incident?
- What was the last?

Also explain the different forms of abuse and violence and ask him what he has experienced and done in each category. Distinguish between violence that is used in self-defense and violence that is used instrumentally to control the other.

Forms of Abuse to explore if no standard inventory is used include:

- Physical
- Sexual
- Psychological/Emotional
- Economic
- Spiritual
- Destruction of Property or Pets.

With the man assess motivation if abuse and violence has been disclosed.

“How important is it to stop being violent with your partner?” Ask about his exposure to violence and his use of violence in the past in this and other relationships. Ask about his health, depression, suicide assessment, head trauma, sexual abuse, and who was there for him as a child? “Who held you if you were hurt, scared or lonely?”

Does he have good friends? Do they know about his abuse/violence? Who does? How have they responded? “Do you have anyone you can call in the middle of the night if you are in crisis?”

Ask if he has had previous psychiatric or psychological contact? Was it helpful? Also ask about medications being taken, drug and alcohol use, weapons owned, training in their use, time in the military, etc.

Have the police ever been called? Does he have any criminal record? Does he think violence is justified? What attempts has he made to change? If he continues to use violence how will it affect his relationship? How hard is it to talk about this? How much courage does it take to face these issues? These questions are based on the ideas presented by Alan Jenkins in his seminal book, Invitations to Responsibility, Dulwich Centre, 1990.

Assessing for feasibility of couples work

Don't be bullied into taking a couple you feel should not be worked with as a couple. Tell her if you think it is too dangerous.

Criteria for starting couples work (Bograd & Mederos, 1999)

1. Both engage in it freely.
2. It can be considered if his violence is limited to a few minor incidents; i.e. slaps, shoves, grabbing or restraining without bruising or injury.
3. Man's use of psychological abuse is infrequent and mild, does not create a climate of constant anger or intimidation, and is neither terrifying nor debilitating to the woman. Therefore, this excludes cases of mild to moderate violence but with severe psychological abuse.
4. No risk factors for lethality are present and the woman is not fearful of retaliation.
5. The man admits and takes responsibility for his abusive behavior. Couples work should not be started if the man expresses no remorse, denies his actions, only blames the woman, and has little commitment to change himself.
6. The man must demonstrate an ongoing commitment to manage his behaviour without blaming or using violence or control tactics. If he does not it suggests that he doesn't get what it has been like for her and doesn't understand responsibility.

My additional criteria

- The woman has an established support system of friends, family or professionals.
- She has a safety plan that is practical and immediately accessible.
- Her plan includes financial freedom.

Parameters

Use an explicit contract with the perpetrator with limits on abuse or aggression and consequences if that is broken; i.e. a return to individual therapy for each. Set goals of ending his abuse in all forms and helping her in recovery from this.

Research shows that written non-violence contracts can make a difference.

Couples work should not proceed if it is not possible for the couple to have a relatively controlled conversation and either person's responses cannot be tempered by the counsellor's response.

Violence disclosed before a couples meeting

Since usually the woman calls to set up an appointment it is possible to ask about abuse at that time. If some violence is present and/or fear it is best to interview her alone first and then him. If there is moderate and infrequent violence, with no fear or risk, then do one cautious session first with the couple.

Disclosure of violence in a session

If it is not severe and there is no concern about serious injury you can proceed to talk about establishing safety. Make agreements for him to take time-outs and for her to accept them.

Can he agree it's his job not to be abusive? Can he agree to time-outs? Will she support this practice? You may uncover a history of him going out to drink, use, have affairs, threaten suicide, etc. If the answer to both is negative this is a good reason not to do couples work. You can then proceed to individual sessions, saying it is common practice to understand how to be most helpful.

If there is a disclosure that is severe and a concern about escalation and safety the man may be caught off guard and feel betrayed. There is a need to assess right away whether it is safe to continue with the two together.

“Is this the first time the two of you have discussed this with another person? Did you agree to talk about it beforehand?”

If there seems to be danger for her it may be helpful to ask questions like, “What's going to happen when you leave this room?” “What needs to be done to keep things safe?” It is best not to ask the woman to disclose the details of her safety plan in a session. Also it is not wise to ask him to leave or even wait in a different room. Some men may not be

able to tolerate this as it heightens their fears of loss and lack of control. He may leave the building and go to apprehend the children, use self-harm or secure a weapon.

Focus on ways of keeping them both safe, “This is a tough time. In a week how would you like to look back and see yourself handling this? What will you need to do in the next few hours and couple of days that might help create the kind of relationship you want with her?” “Do you think it is her job to behave in ways so you don’t hurt or frighten her or is it your job?” “What kinds of values are most important for you to live by in relating to your wife?”

If he has made the disclosure or he agrees with and/or expands upon his wife’s disclosure this is a great opportunity. Highlight any evidence of responsibility (Jenkins, 1990). “Many men would blame or attack their wife for saying this in front of me today. How have you been able to listen to or acknowledge this? How tough has this been? Have you been tempted to be defensive? How have you resisted this? Why is staying non-defensive important?”

“If you continue doing these kinds of things how will it affect you and her?” “I’m worried about what you just told me. If you hurt her you may destroy this relationship and end up being charged. Have you thought of this?” “Are there times she has said or done these things that you have not responded with (insert acknowledged abuse/violence)? How have you managed to do that?” “Have you been successful at convincing her that it is her fault or her job to be different so you won’t use violence or abuse?”

“Do you want to give her that much control over how you behave?” (in response to him saying, “If she would only not do this then I wouldn’t respond like that”). Indicate that couples work is not appropriate until he does his own counselling focused on changing these behaviours, and meanwhile she can see someone for herself. “I’m concerned that couples counselling could make things worse at this time.” “Jim, you need to realize that when you behave like this you drive people away. It creates fear, and it’s hard to be close to, trust or love someone that you are afraid of. Using force or threats in families isn’t justified no matter how unfair it feels to be in your shoes. No one deserves to be hit and no one should have to earn the right to be free of fear.”

If the man cannot respond to these invitations it is important to state the risks. “I am concerned about what will happen. Have you thought that you might really hurt her or kill her? What will your life be like if you do something this terrible? I’m worried about you and your partner.” There may be a risk of being empathic to her in his presence. He can perceive that as you taking her side against him.

Conflicting reports of violence in individual meetings

She may disclose a dangerous level of violence and ask that it be confidential, while he denies violence in your interview with him. Even if she says it is OK to share the information with him this should be taken under advisement. Does she have the ability to

assess her risk?

So you need to decline couples work but are prevented from disclosing why. Always ask if he is pressuring her to do couples therapy and demanding that she not disclose his behaviour in any way.

The man may refuse to come to therapy except with his partner. You can refuse to see them as a couple. But if they refuse individual counselling he may demand that she not see an individual therapist while also refusing to go to any counselling on his own. It might be necessary to see them a few times in hopes of developing enough of an alliance that you can shift them to individual work.

Cautions

It is easy to have a false sense of security. Even when you screen for violence as described here minimization, distrust of professionals or fear of what may be done with the information may cause you to believe the risk is very low or non-existent when it is high or dormant. Risk assessment is always an educated guess and never certain.

Violence must be assessed dynamically by understanding the experience of the woman and not statically through scales alone. Jacqueline Campbell says that the woman's fear is one of the best predictors of risk. A minor event many years ago may have shifted the balance of power; for example, the wife who said at the beginning of their relationship that she could never say no to sex, so she never did. So your screening may not have found it, but do you find that one person always answers questions for the other?

Many women are helped most by making a connection with a support network, a lawyer to know their rights, disclosing to a few friends or family, and developing a safety plan.

Some additional suggestions

You may find that this has been a relationship of power and control, but it is not at this time. The criteria above for doing couples therapy have been met. What should you do as you start couples therapy? What is different about working with a couple when power and control has been an issue compared to couples where it never has been?

Make a written contract with the man to agree to non-violence. Complete this in a couples session. Include as part of the agreement that if he breaks it he will contact you to report his aggression. The plan can include an agreement to take time-outs to avoid abusive behaviour. The plan can be stated in the positive; for example, "To enhance trust, respect and safety in my relationship I commit to ending violent and abusive behaviours. If I go against this agreement I will support my partner's actions to feel safe and will contact my therapist to report this. I understand that I will need to return to counselling focused on ending my use of violence and abuse."

One woman came up with the idea of her partner posting a security, with the agreement

that if he were violent or abusive again he would lose to her what he put up as security. This was something of value that he chose and that had emotional/sentimental meaning for him. She reported that this had been helpful. He seemed pleased to make this commitment.

Prepare the man to deal with the fear, loss of trust, and emotional injury he has caused through his use of violence by using the Responsibility Letter (Trimble) with the Six Kinds Of Violence And Abuse or another inventory. Make sure he is detailed in his descriptions. Ask if he is prepared to hear her feelings. Remember that he may be expecting compassion and forgiveness, but may instead get anger and even coldness. Explain to him how her distance, anger or coldness is an important step for her and is positive. All of this can be done in an individual session with him that prepares him to present his Letter of Responsibility to her.

Use a timeline with him to help process what she has experienced in the history of the relationship. By mapping the times of his use of violence or power and control, as well as his apologies and promises to “never do it again,” he can see that her lack of trust and coldness make sense and are based on his failure to practise safety and respect, rather than something wrong with her. Process this in session with her.

Questions that can help with him

- “How should she make sense of your apologies in the past when you haven’t been able to stay with non-violence and respect?”
- “How have you been able to tolerate her anger and coldness without resorting to pleading or demanding that she do her part by forgiving you?”
- “What does that tell you about your changes?”
- “What will you need to do to sustain the ability to hear her pain and tolerate her distance, even when you so desperately want her to be close?”
- “How have you been able to resist turning this pain into criticism or putdown of her?”
- “Even though you are trying so hard to be different in hopes that she will see you’ve really changed for good; she may still choose to leave. How would you like to look back on the way you’ve handled this?”
- “Imagine it’s 6 months or a year from now. How will you handle this distance in such a way that you can feel proud of yourself as a man?”

Remember, these guidelines do not guarantee a safe intervention, but a safer intervention.

Work hard to maintain an alliance with each person regardless of what they have done or had done to them. Your ability to keep asking kind and respectful questions can make a big difference in keeping the person engaged in the process of change.

Dale Trimble welcomes comments and feedback on this material and answers mail at daletrimble@telus.net