The Other Side of Help: Negative Effects in the Help-Seeking Processes of Abused Women

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Data from 32 in-depth interviews with abused women in outreach groups demonstrated that respondents first sought assistance from informal helpers by telling the stories of their violent experiences. Telling was a significant social act since it made public their "fictions of intimacy" (Tifft 1993), affected their perceptions of their relationships, and altered others' definitions of the couple. In part because help providers often reduced the complexity of intimate relationships to incidents of violence, well-intentioned help provision frequently had unintended negative consequences. It was not necessarily the help women wanted and the assistance was often based on a definitional contingency, or acceptance of others' definitions of the situations and others' prescriptions for action. This contingency placed the women in the same relation to the supporters as they were to the abusers, that is, others controlled the definitions of their experiences and their identities.

KEY WORDS: wife abuse; help-seeking; domestic violence; abuse; battering.

Since the 1970s, feminists have articulated the gendered nature of the social problem "wife abuse" and the need for helping resources to address it, including safe houses, shelters for abused women and their children, counseling and advocacy (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Schechter 1982; Loseke 1987, 1992; Tifft 1993). The long-range goal of these resource programs was the elimination of violence against women. Once in place many of the suggested measures demonstrated considerable success in rescuing women during acute periods of violence. Many programs were then adapted to include outreach services designed to meet the ongoing needs of women

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who remained in violent relationships (Sullivan et al. 1992; Dolan & Hendricks 1991; Cox & Stoltenberg 1991), needs that were not at all times acute. But none were successful in eliminating the problem of violence against women in intimate relationships.

Most community interventions tactically "rescue" women from "abusive, terror-filled" environments and offer advocacy and counseling resources in separate, safe places intended to provide women with "a stepping stone to independence" (Loseke 1992:32; Tifft 1993). Yet women return to shelters again and again (Gelles 1976; Schechter 1982; Loseke 1992; Tifft 1993), perhaps because the focus of remediation is not on men's violence but on women's victimization, and perhaps because shelter stays are time limited, are frequently isolated from family and friends, and are removed from the everyday cycles and responsibilities of women's lives. Additionally, community interventions do not typically involve participation from members of women's informal network systems (Loseke 1992), who are often the first persons informed about or witness to the violence, as well as the first to offer strategic advice and temporary shelter (Dobash & Dobash 1979). Analyses of these informal network resources are limited in research reports about abused women.

In this article I offer an examination of some significant social actions that abused women take to access help from informal network resources, initially to preserve their relationships and later to leave them. Collective representations of "wife abuse" reduce such relationships to acts of violence and hold that abused women should resolve the problem of their abuse by leaving their abusing mates (Loseke 1992). Abused women, however, hold much more complex interpretations of their mates and their relationships. They believe in their partners as their primary sources of love and affection and, simultaneously, as the most dangerous persons in their lives (Walker 1979; Lempert 1995). It is this simultaneity that must be grasped analytically to understand when, why, and how abused women seek help to cope with, change, and/or leave their relationships.

Theories developed to explain "domestic violence" and/or "wife abuse" have contributed to an understanding of the whole of the complex dynamic (See Walker 1979, 1989 on psychosocial cycle of violence theory; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz 1980 for culture of violence theory; Pagelow 1984 for social learning theory; Giles-Sims 1983 for general systems theory; Dobash and Dobash 1979 and Martin 1976 for conflict theory; Straus 1977 for ultimate resource theory; MacKinnon 1993 for eroticization of violence theory). Yet none is complete.

With few exceptions (Dobash & Dobash 1981; Ferraro and Johnson 1983; Mills 1985; Loseke 1987; Chang 1989), researchers on wife abuse have focused on what women in violent relationships *do* rather than *how*

abused women interpret the violent actions, or events, and *how* those mean-
ing-making interpretations affect their help-seeking processes. Most of the
research on battered women's help-seeking has focused on formal agencies,
primarily police and medical responses (or lack thereof) and community
shelters (Berk et al. 1983, 1984; Berk & Loseke 1980/81; Bowker & Maurer
1987; Edwards 1987; Ferraro 1987, 1989; Schechter 1982; Stark & Flitcraft
1983, 1988; Loseke 1992). My analysis has as its fundamental focus the
informal help-seeking overtures of women in abusive relationships, that is,
within the contradictory, but simultaneous, contexts of love and violence,
and it includes the unintended consequences of these overtures. By direct-
ing analytic attention to some negative effects of well-intentioned assistance
efforts, this work extends the reports of previous researchers and highlights
both help-seeking processes and their unanticipated consequences. It fur-
ther calls attention to the ways that binary divisions of either/or logic im-
pede both the help-seeking and the help-provision processes.

In this presentation the contradictory duality between women's agency
and women's victimization is also salient, that is, the "victims" are also
active agents defining, interpreting, and negotiating with their partners and
with others. As "victims" they are not entirely passive and as "agents" they
are not co-acting equals in their interactions with male partners. Their help-
seeking overtures occur within complex relational dynamics that both limit
and evoke external assistance.

In analyzing these overtures, there is risk of ascribing false linearity
to on-going interactive processes. Abusive men are not at all times violent
and controlling, they may also at times be contrite and loving partners.
Battered women often simultaneously love their partners and hate the
abuse. It must, therefore, be emphasized that the processes analyzed here
are circular, simultaneous, and overlapping. They are part of ongoing in-
teractions and are, therefore, affected by prior incidents and affecting of
subsequent interactions. However, this does not necessarily mean that the
women could chart what was happening to them while they were in the
throes of the violent relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis is grounded in in-depth interview data from 32 women
who reported experiencing repeated interpersonal violence, of a physical,
psychological and/or emotional nature, at the hands of their intimate male
partners. The self-selected respondents came from an outreach support
group, an ancillary service to a women's shelter. Respondents had either
left their abusive partners or had remained and were attempting to cope

with, change, or terminate their relationships before they became acute. The particularities of a self-selected, self-identified sample of abused women clearly limit the generalizability of the data. Nonetheless, because they speak to the formations, rationalizations, and interpretations of their experiences, it is precisely such participants of outreach groups who can provide clues for programs and policies to reach those battered women who do not come to public attention.

Of the 32 participants, 9 were women of color who self-identified as Philippina (2), Black (5), Chinese American (1), and Hispanic (1). Gender appeared to be most salient in the narratives of these women, that is, their victimization as female partners appeared to transcend issues of race and/or ethnicity, although a larger sample of cross-race comparisons would be needed to test this further. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57 years old.

The interviews ranged in duration from 1 to 4 1/2 hours. All interviews were taped and, in keeping with grounded theory methodology, most were transcribed (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Participants responded to an open-ended probe: "Tell me the story of this relationship." They were thus able to construct the narrative in their own terms as they currently understood it. In most cases, their retelling was episodic and provided significant insights into the history of their own developing awarenesses of the scope of the problem.

Particular methodological debate has centered around epistemological questions in wife abuse research. Feminist theorists (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Bograd 1988; Yllo 1988) argue that traditional research categories reflect male constructed understandings of women, abuse, and intimate relationships. Specifically, at both macro and micro levels these presuppositions ignore questions of the unequal distribution of power, patriarchal social contexts, and socially structured and culturally maintained male/female relations. Fitting women's experiences into predefined codes, it is argued, leads to biased results, limits theorizing on the range of variation of women's experiences, and reduces the complexity of the situation within the context in which it transpires. Because grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990) stresses discovery and theory development, it is particularly well suited to the study of this research domain.

This presentation is an analysis of help-seeking overtures and the sometimes inverse and contradictory outcomes recounted by the women in this study. All of the respondents reported negative responses from informal network members to their requests for assistance, reports of violence, and/or characterizations of their relationships. In presenting these informal help-seeking processes, I begin by establishing the contextual frame for the

overtures with a brief overview of the violent relationships centering analytic attention on the control of the definitions of the situations and, consequently, on the women and the violence. I then turn to "telling others," the primary informal help seeking strategy recounted by the respondents. I conclude with the negative effects of well-intentioned support processes.

VIOLENCE AND HELP SEEKING

Intimate relationships are not formally structured and definitions and behaviors are not clearly delineated. Husband and wife interactions, unlike most social roles with limited activity, cover wide varieties of continuous contact (Gross 1987). Eating, sleeping, playing, and sexual activity are filled with unremitting closeness. It was within such intimacy that the women in this study reported their partners defining them as "cunt," "whore," "bitch," "career woman hag," and so forth. While these epithets were broad, social characterizations of women, they were also attacks on individual women in their social locations *vis a vis* their mates. Even if the women were employed outside their homes, the potential for perspectives to counter those put forth by the abusers was limited if their significant identities remained embedded in their relationships. Because their partners were *the* significant others in their lives, the women in this study accorded legitimacy to the men's characterizations of them.

These terms of derogation then became more than just features of women's lives with abusive men, they began to constitute the definitional frames of their worlds. Publically, most of the women acquiesced to the definitions; privately, they resisted them. The definitional control that abusive men assumed early on presaged the overt physical violence that later permeated the couples' lives together.

In response to the men's characterizations of them and to the initial incidents of physical violence, the women reported modifying their usual actions to alter the men's definitions, engaging in what Tifft (1993:33) has called "self-deconstructive behaviors." They acted hesitatingly and they stopped "activity in a lot of volunteer work and other community things," "friendships," "going to the gym," "taking the bus," "going to the store," and so on. By choosing self-isolating behaviors, the women guilelessly reinforced the definitional hegemony of the abusers. Most did not report telling anyone about the abuse and most did not report asking for help. Instead, they symbolically reconstructed past violent episodes reinterpreting and redefining their meanings (Maines et al. 1983) to make them consonant with their own definitional frames of love, marriage, and family.

Male partners were also reported to have defined both the verbal and physical assaults against the women as non-violent and as victim provoked. For reasons of personal safety, the women did not overtly contest the men's definitions, instead they deferred and tacitly accepted causal responsibility. Self blame saturated their experiences, but became increasingly untenable as the abuse continued. This respondent articulated experiences common to others:

> ...and during that last year too I really tried to make it work. It was important to him that I cook dinner. So I made sure that I cooked dinner for him every evening. He'd come, he'd eat, he'd go back to the office which was, ah, two blocks away. So I really tried. I thought well it's me, I'm not pleasing him. So I tried to really be a good wife. I won't take as many classes. I'll really concentrate on making the marriage work. I'll keep the house really clean and I'll do his laundry and I'll cook him his meals and I'll do everything to make him happy so that he won't be unhappy anymore. And his problem will go away. And ha ha, you know, I, I mean it doesn't matter what you've done. They're still, they're still going to find something to explode about.

Respondents vacillated between alternating, contradictory realities— theirs and the abusers'. As they increasingly isolated themselves from others, the respondents faced on-going challenges to the veracity of their own conceptualizations and they tacitly accorded salience to the men's definitions. Although no respondent reported acceptance of the men's accounts, many tried to develop definitions reflective of their experiences and congruent with both their partners' actions and their own reconstructions of love, marriage and family.

Because violence assures acquiescence, if not agreement, abusive males further attempted to impose their definitions of reality, their control, over their intimate partners by preventing them from thinking critically about themselves as persons with separate identities (Tifft 1993; Lempert 1995). This respondent recounted the authority present in these control processes:

> And he came home and he walked in the door and, and he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm drinking this can of Coke. I just finished cleaning the apartment." And whenever he said 'what are you doing' there was a tone in his voice I knew I was in trouble, you know, it was like I knew it. And I couldn't figure out what I'd done. Immediately I go through this mental checklist—what did I do, am I wearing the wrong clothes, something on the floor, is the cat in the wrong place, am I in the wrong place, you know, and I couldn't figure out what was it that I had done. I've done something I don't know what it is. Well, it was the Coke. And he flew into a rage. "What a selfish, fucking asshole you are drinking the last Coke. How could you do that?"

From the women's perspectives, acquiescence was a tactic for survival and it was consistent with their other problem-solving strategies (Lempert 1996).

As the violence escalated from verbal to physical abuse, over time it became the most salient feature of these relationships. It also often became

the catalyst for help seeking overtures. For most women, help seeking and help provision are a taken for granted part of life (Gerstel & Gross 1989; Baruch et al. 1983). Socially and culturally, women expect to give and receive assistance from family and friends (Baruch et al. 1983; Gilligan 1982). These interactions are only partly conscious and develop without deliberate attention unless they are unusual, repeated, and/or inconvenient. Seeking and providing assistance for a violent relationship involves precisely the unexpected, the recurrent, and the inconvenient.

TELLING OTHERS

Consonant with the findings of other researchers (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Ferraro & Johnson 1983; Mills 1985; Pagelow 1984; Walker 1979, 1989), most of the women in this study interpreted their violent experiences as personal and idiosyncratic and largely as consequences of their own shortcomings and failures. Locked into definitional dialogues with their mates, it was difficult for the women to develop other perspectives. (For a fuller explication of definitional dialogues, see Lempert 1995.)

Recurring assaults led the respondents to redefine the abuse from isolated aberrations into problems to be managed. They modified their behaviors and truncated their social lives in attempts to alter the men's disparaging definitions of them. When these strategies had limited or no effects on the frequency and/or severity of the violent episodes, the women reported seeking new tactics to control the violence and new conceptual frames to explain it. Riessman (1990:ix) found an analogous process in her study of divorce, "To cope with events that jar our illusions of permanency, we usually talk about them. We reflect on what has happened, assign motives, and characterize the situation in the context of a general scheme of meaning, which includes explanations provided by our cultures. Through interpretation, we not only render events meaningful, but also empower ourselves to go on, despite loss and change."

Like Riessman's respondents, these abused women began supplementing their individual strategies by talking about their experiences with others. Through the stories they told themselves and others, they sought assistance that would help them make sense of, justify, and legitimate their continuing efforts in the relationships. Most respondents stated clearly that initially in telling others they were *not* trying to leave. The respondents loved their partners, while they simultaneously hated the violence. Their narrations reflected the failures of the binary model of abuse conceptualization, the either/or of staying/leaving, to adequately capture the complexity of these intimate interactions. The following respondent, for example, articulated

the reluctance to leave as she conveyed the oft-repeated sentiments of others:

> So I really don't want to be without him. I really don't. I really want us to be together, I want us to be a family and it's not this thing where I hear women say 'Oh, thank god I got away from him' or 'I had to go to this shelter to get away from him' or 'He kept me captive and I wanted to get away.' Or they're dying to get away and I'm not dying to get away...I honestly think that maybe we can save each other or something.

Having chosen to stay, many respondents then attempted to develop alternative definitions that would both maintain their on-going investments in love, marriage, and family, as well as explain their partners' violence. Within this context they sought informal assistance that would "return" them to harmonious relationships.

Mills (1985) has suggested that although struggles for protection within their violent relationships were private, women involved others when they feared danger of injury or death. The data from this study extend Mills' argument, that is, these respondents attempted to involve others not simply for personal safety, but when they perceived that their own resources and alternatives were exhausted, when they had lost hope in their own efficacy to reduce or eliminate the violence.

The primary help seeking strategy identified by all respondents was simply telling others about the violence. Telling was a significant social act because it made public their "fictions of intimacy" (Tifft 1993), affected their own perceptions of their relationships, and altered others' definitions of them and their partners (Loseke 1987). Telling others was intended to generate external involvement and to bring in additional problem solving techniques and perspectives. As a strategy, it was also intended to confirm the women's own interpretations of their situations as antidote to those of their partners.

When they began telling their compelling stories, the respondents expected that others would share their definitions of the situations. Instead, they often encountered the same resistance from others that they themselves experienced initially, that is, shock and disbelief. One respondent communicated this dismay:

> ...[T]he first time I finally told my brother, he didn't want to believe me. He did believe me, but he *really* didn't want to. He didn't want to believe the threats...It's hard to believe someone in your family is getting hurt. And it's hard to believe that you could have been fooled by somebody that much too. That was the hardest thing for me to really accept the fact that I'm this stupid believing [partner]... (emphasis is respondent's)

This initial discounting of their stories challenged the women's experiences and perceptions and resulted in further strengthening of the men's

definitions. The women came to understand that, for a variety of reasons, they might not be successful in convincing others of their plight.

In the beginning the women also denied and/or discounted others, definitions of their relationships as "abusive", their partners as "batterers", and themselves as "victims". They resisted these stigmatizing identities (Denzin 1984; Loseke 1987). Further dissonance developed because others often held orientations of the violent events as unambiguous assaults requiring immediate action to ensure safety, while the women held orientations bred in the ambiguity of love and violence and predicated on commitment and their partners' promises of change.

Thus women vacillated as they struggled with the alternative frames for interpretation offered first by their spouses and then by their informal help providers. Neither of these frames was compatible with their experiences because both were either/or conceptualizations. Abusers reduced the complexity and presented themselves as blameless and as reacting to defects or deficits in the women; informal helpers reduced the complexity by seeing the violence as paramount and by characterizing the men as "abusers". Neither version accounted for the range of the women's experiences and definitions.

Such conflicting orientations further resulted in contradictory definitions of the women, as these oppositional constructions by and about a single respondent demonstrated:

> You like it. You enjoy it. You call him up, don't you? You go for it. That's what you like in a guy. You don't like nice guys. You like, you know, really mean guys. You like to get batted around, because then, you know, you can cry the blues or somethin'.

vs.

> ...me as somebody who (pause 6 seconds) doesn't deserve this kind of behavior from someone, who, it isn't really me. It isn't part of my life. It doesn't really have anything to do with me. My future is not part of this mess.

Confusion was increased by the reductionist definitions of others—definitions that reflect the American interpretive structure of individualism and the biases toward making sense of all behaviors in terms of individual choices (Loseke 1992). Abused women live in a social "Catch 22", that is, they are held complicit in the abuse for their continuing presence in the violent relationships versus their own recognitions that violence is only one aspect of a complex multidimensional relationship that also includes significant acts of love and affection. Abusive men were reported to have been "nurturing," "loving," "very affectionate," and "romantic." Partially because abuse identities are stigmatizing (Denzin 1984; Loseke 1987) and partially

because outsiders didn't understand the relational complexity, the respondents initially rejected their definitions.

As the violence and control escalated and consumed their relationships, the women lost hope of changing the trajectories of violence, as this respondent poignantly recounted:

> That day I went over there, I said I'm gonna go spend the week end with my boyfriend and I'm gonna go be with the person I love, who I wanna be with more than anybody in the whole world 'cause I'm in love with him, 'cause he's smart and he's (pause) sexy and he's (pause), he's an incredible person...I was in a good mood. And I was gonna have fun. And I was so happy to go have fun, you know, and within 45 minutes or 3 hours, it was a complete nightmare...We could do anything. Fine. Go to a movie. Rent a movie. Stay home. Not stay home. Take a bubble bath together. Anything, but no, we're gonna do the torture chamber, the, you know, (pause) the power plays.

After abandoning hope for harmony with their mates, the respondents began to seek the assistance of informal helpers and to accord their definitions some measure of validity. Telling others, although not immediately remedial, had cumulative influences for some women as it furthered their efforts to construct new definitions. As more and more helpers defined the relationships in the same ways and as the abusers' emotional violence escalated into repeated physical assaults, these women reconstructed their old definitions.

Mills (1985) maintained that without other perspectives, women were unable to relinquish their old definitional frameworks and re-define their situations. They came to new definitions only with the help of outside validation. This data confirm Mills' assertion in that those women who maintained dialogues with friends and family, who began telling immediately, and thereby implicitly asking for others' interpretations early on, frequently left the relationships before the violence became chronic. External interpretive discourse was apparently one way to fracture the control of abusive men.

For others, telling ended the women's experiences of isolation, loneliness, and envelopment within definitional dialogues. These respondents had attempted to deal rationally and alone with what was experienced as irrational behavior. Eventually all of the respondents sought outside assistance. They went first to informal sources, mostly friends and family, to tell their stories. As the violent experiences were shared and reinterpreted, sometimes in conformity with the women's own assessments and definitions, at a minimum their doubts regarding the abusers' definitions surfaced and were expressed along with fragments of their own reflexivity.

Telling others about the violence challenged these women to reframe their relationships and their participation in them. Their consequent definition-making processes were dialectical and they were fuelled by a triangulation of tensions. Each new definition framed was in opposition to

another which was, itself, contradictory in nature. Both abusers and informal helpers presented the women with binary (although polarized from one another) models that were inadequate representations of the women's experiences of multidimensionality. The women struggled to reconstruct definitions that were often subsequently disputed by both their partners and their informal helpers.

Efforts of the abusers to impose definitions that defined the violence as victim precipitated, or efforts of the informal helpers to define the men as totally responsible for the violent interactions precluded definitional synthesis because, particularly in the throes of an on-going relationship, the women had difficulty sorting fact from fiction. Consequently, their emergent definitions were rife with ambiguity and contradiction. Their partners were not blameless and the women were not totally responsible, *but* the women were not entirely blameless and the men were not totally responsible either. Relationships, even violent ones, are interactive in nature. This understanding does not imply, however, that women "deserve" to be beaten or that there was an equal distribution of power in the relationships. Abused women are at a distinct disadvantage in relations with their spouses, but, as the respondents insisted, they are not totally without agency.

HELP PROVISION

Help provision was predicated on the potential providers' acceptance of the women's accounts of repeated physical and/or emotional violence and especially, but not necessarily, on according some measure of veracity to the women's definitions of the situations. Help seeking overtures represented requests for alternative interpretations so even when external responses lacked definitional symmetry, the respondents reported experiencing others' *beliefs* in their accounts as supportive. Having someone believe them was legitimating as it bolstered their senses of personal worth, frequently validated their perceptions, and often mitigated the effects of the abusers' definitions. Active listening had positive effects as this typical comment illustrated:

> So I feel a lot more powerful. I have people that believe me. People that know me, that know I'm a good mom, you know, that I'm not always, I'm not, I don't feel like I'm all by myself trying to fight the world.

Help was most often perceived as affirmation of their realities, their definitions of self as not deserving of the violence and their definitions of their marital situations as "fictions of intimacy" (Tifft 1993). Respondents asked that social supporters listen and help interpret, but not impose their own

definitions. It was the abused women, not their helpers, who were in the relationships. They knew that they were the ones who had to play out whatever alternative strategies or courses of action would be generated by telling others. Consistently they reported not wanting to be defined solely by the circumstances of their violent relationships (Denzin 1984). They wanted definitional assistance, not definitional oppression—whether framed by others or by their own partners.

Definitional Assistance

Often when these women began talking about the violent nature of their marital relationships, they were speaking from crises of ambiguity, having exhausted their individual resources for interpreting the directed violence from their intimate partners. At those times, they were so caught up in the "perpetual present" (Denzin 1990) that they were unable to create stories that reflected upon the past or projected a future. The "perpetual present" was movingly captured by this respondent:

> At other times, I, I couldn't talk, because I (pause 3 seconds), I (pause 3 seconds), it's gotten to the point where I couldn't solve a problem. Because I, I can't create anything, I don't have any way to um, rejuvenate myself. You know sometimes I think women tend to hold on to pain—it's hard for them to release, but they uh, usually find their own way to um, let go of it, and yet I feel like I just sit there and take on, I think he, well he dumps all of his pain onto me.

They wanted someone, some powerful third party, to put an end to the violence and to restore them to their pre-violence assumptions of family love and harmony. When this insurmountable task went unmet by their potential helpers, some women felt like this respondent:

> People don't really fucking care, to tell you the truth. They would rather not be bothered. It either hits too close to home, or, you know, like what did *you* do? (emphasis is respondent's)

Others accepted whatever advice and direction was put forth and responded to their social supporters as they had responded to their abusers—with acquiescence:

> So I was in such a state of despair I was willing to do what they told me to do. I was really, I mean, beyond beyond—and desperate. And they told me to get out, they said I was in a potentially fatal, you know—so I got out and that night I spent the night in a hotel.

In crises of ambiguity, some respondents were willing to accept suggestions for action predicated on their supporters' definitions of the situation, even if the suggestions invalidated their own interpretations.

Actionable Assistance

As the women gradually came to accept the limited nature of help from supporters, as they recognized that others could not remake the relationships into their hoped-for restorative images, and as the additive effects of outsider definitions began to alter their interpretations, they became more active in utilizing outside support to mitigate the violence. In highly idiosyncratic ways, the women divided their areas of concern into discrete units. Perhaps because these processes allowed them to isolate their areas of worry and concern, and perhaps because this isolation was itself a course of action initiated by the women, eventually they were able to ask for assistance with tasks that were actionable. Supporters were no longer asked to unburden them of the entire scope of the violence, but only to help remediate a discrete portion. Help for many respondents became reconstructed as this respondent indicated:

> Something that showed something positive, that showed that there were some choices, not "oh, you do this and it will all be OK." 'Cause nobody is going to believe that. But yes, this person did that and that worked for them and that person did that and that worked, at least partly, for them, and there are some things that you can do.

Assistance that was experienced as helpful empowered the women as it did not include false promises or totalizing solutions. Effective helpers suggested, but did not demand, alternative actions, additional interpretations, and fresh strategies.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WELL-INTENTIONED SUPPORT

Human interaction always contains "an emergent, negotiated, often unpredictable" quality (Denzin 1989:5) and thus the consequences of actions may differ from the intentions. While both the abused women and their social supporters wanted the violence to end, they often defined the situations and the participants in them quite differently. Well-intentioned helpers often did not recognize how the common typifications of wife abuse and battered women affected and shaped their responses to individual help-seeking overtures. This respondent described the frustrating consequences of her overtures to friends who held these binary typifications:

> I'm not a shy one about asking for help and if there was somebody I thought could have helped me, I'd ask. And a lot of people turned me down because they didn't want to get involved...They [2 women friends] were just really shitty, they didn't do jackshit. I mean, I said, can somebody just talk to me, and they go, (mimics) "You're going to have to make a decision, do you want to leave or not?" They were just so shitty. I mean they were just so shitty. I said I want to talk (unclear), I need to

figure out what I'm going I to do. They go, well you have to make the decision, are you going to leave or not?

To interpret the physical and emotional assaults, respondents reported needing help to clarify the confusions resulting from the dissonance between partner assaults and imputations of blame and their own on-going reconstructions of the relationships. The following respondent plaintively recounted the most commonly desired outcome of help-seeking overtures:

...[W]hat I really needed from them [helpers] is to assure me that I wasn't insane, that I wasn't totally at fault with everything that was going wrong. 'Cause I felt, he made me feel, you know...it was me, always me.

Becoming "Victims"

Initially simple acceptance of the veracity of the women's accounts was reported as supportive. Once that occurred the women then asked for support for *their* particular ascriptions of meaning. To be experienced as helpful, the meanings negotiated had to include the women's own interpretations of their experiences. Most reported as burdensome the imposition by others of social definitions of them, of the violence, or of the relationships. By focusing on some details and ignoring others, informal helpers, particularly those with little personal knowledge of violence, tended to reduce the relationships to the incidences of violence, thus erasing their multi-dimensionality, and thus reducing the women to "victims" (Denzin 1984).

"Calling someone a victim organizes an understanding of that person as a particular *type* to whom certain characteristics are attributed and orientations taken..." (Holstein & Miller 1990:106). Attributing victim status led others to see the women as incapable of managing, or understanding, their own situations without help (Loseke 1992). Well-intentioned friends, family, and co-workers then were justified in offering (sometimes uninformed) advice or stepping in to help them manage. As a consequence, the women again lost control over their definitions of self, over interpretations of their experiences, and over their relationships with the men (Loseke & Cahill 1984). One respondent, whose three children were placed in foster care as a result of the abuse she experienced, was nonetheless fierce in her resistance to such "victim" attribution. Forced by court order to attend support group meetings at an outreach center for abused women, she passed me a handwritten note:

Something I did not say to you was, I do not come here on my own, but the courts have told me I have to come.

This woman refused to be defined by her experiences of violence or by her participation in the outreach group. She struggled for her own identity in what Loseke (1987) has called "reality definition contests".

Competing definitions of the violent relationships resulted in additional unintended negative effects. While women were struggling to maintain their own definitions in the face of the abusers' assaults and continuous denigrating definitions of them, they were also struggling to interpret the contradictions inherent in violent intimate relationships: If he loves me why does he beat me? As they waged this very personal struggle, they again ran the risk of losing their autonomy to well-meaning supporters.

The presumed intention of support is the provision of help—emotional, material, psychological—but the consequences of help may not be useful to the recipient for a variety of reasons (Coyne 1988). In the case of battered women, it may not be the help they want, but instead may be assistance others impose on them. This respondent, unemployed due to time lost from physical assaults, was not alone in recounting the tension between her definitions of appropriate help and her supporters conflicting agendas:

> Well, it depends on what kind of help, these people think that if I call them, they'll come and get me and I'll stay with them, but that's not the help, that what I feel like in the meetings I come to, everyone says, the guy's a jerk and you're all right, don't let him make you think it's you and they give you all these ways of getting a place to stay or food to eat, but they don't tell you how to go back and deal with the person...because you're not learning how to deal with it at the time, you're learning how to run away, you know what I mean?

She was struggling with competing definitions. She did not accept the supporters' definitions that exiting the relationship was the only solution for ending the violence. Rather, she retained her own conviction that there were ways to "deal" with violent men. The kind of help she wanted was specific—remedies that would empower her in interactions with this man. She was not willing to leave a relationship that she experienced as more than just incidents of violence. She loved her partner and hated the violence.

Definitional Contingency Factor

As previously indicated when respondents sought help or assistance, they frequently had to convince the potential helpers that they had, in fact, experienced serious violence at the hands of their intimate partners. Moreover, they also had to prove that they were worthy of help and assistance (Loseke 1992). A major condition for assistance was evidence of the women's personal intent to change the circumstances of violence and commitment to "doing something about it," i.e., often by leaving the abuser or, in the case of the police, by filing charges. This condition frequently had negative consequences.

One such consequence resulted from the definitional contingency factor, that is, others would provide help as long as the women were willing

to accept *their* definitions of the situations and *their* prescriptions for action, as long as the women would try to "get out." If the women rejected supporters' definitions and prescriptions, they were often blamed for continuing in the relationships, for refusing help, for liking the abuse, and so on. This respondent related this common experience, which others also articulated:

> Well, [2 friends] think because if I'm getting beat on it's because I'm staying with him, I mean—I must like it. That's what they say. I hate it. How can you like it? Do women honestly like it? Are there women who like it? I hear that so much—

If respondents were willing to acquiesce to others' definitions of their situations, they also had to be willing to accept others' definitions of them as dependent, masochistic, passive, and complicit in the violence. To avoid these characterizations, as they had previously resisted the denigrating characterizations of their partners, respondents assumed responsibility and asserted beliefs in their personal control over the courses of the violence. This woman gave voice to this process:

> It wasn't him. It was me. I mean, I'm the only one that can stop him from abusing me. No policeman can. No doctor...It's just a run around wastin' everyone's time, cryin' the blues just to hear myself talk, you know. And get everyone to go, "(Gasp) Oh, poor you. Oh, bad him."

This strategy minimized being defined as "victim" and created visions of themselves as having personal power. These women could not afford to relinquish their beliefs that they had some control, however relative it might be. Their survival depended on it. To define themselves as total victims could lead to demoralization, suicide, and/or homicide. Survival depended on continued and creative use of whatever personal powers they possessed, even if it was only the power to remain in the relationship.

Acquiescence to Helpers

To alter these outsider definitions, while simultaneously clinging to their own definitions, *the abused women stood in the same relation to their helpers as they stood with regard to their abusers.* That is, in order to change others' definitions of them, they had to appear to acquiesce to these definitions and to alter their own actions. This respondent was in the throes of deciding to leave her abusive partner when she reflexively described this defining process:

> ...[T]his is a great one, 'if I were you' or 'if this were happening to me,' that's what I heard. I heard some of that 'you oughta' so I got all of these, you know, these bedside therapists, these shade tree therapists, who were telling me how to handle the situation that I was in, and I couldn't tell them, I didn't tell them everything that was going on, so they didn't know the whole story...They had all the answers. Because they could tell me exactly what they would do if they were me...I'm very

foolish about the way I handle this...I'm the biggest goof of all, and they wouldn't
do it and they don't see why I'm doing it. Not to say that I can answer that myself—

Another consequence of outsiders defining the violent relationship and
a further condition for a negative effect in help provision was the limited
ability of some potential supporters to comprehend the women's experi-
ences of constant terror and ambiguity. Lacking this understanding, others
defined courses of action for the women which were not consistent with
their own definitions of the situations. One respondent graphically narrated
this effect as it occurred in the last few weeks of her relationship:

> I was sleeping fully dressed, shoes on, keys in my pocket, even the last few weeks
> he was there, because I figured if only one of us [woman and her 2 children] can
> get out, I want to have the keys to get back in. Because that's what I had to do.
> We had gone over where are the fire signals so you can get a fire alarm, [emergency
> hospital] is 4 blocks away, the emergency room is always open...it was like living
> in a war zone. It was, the enemy was in your camp and you had to be real careful
> about it...Yeah, everyone was saying, 'why don't you change the locks? At least
> you've got that.' No. He could have gone back to the police and had me give him
> a key [because of the conditions of a restraining order].

Helpers' definitions then did not necessarily recognize that abused women's
physical survival depended on their responses to the batterers' definitions
of the situation. Abuser definitions were paramount. Respondents reported
not formulating plans or ignoring suggested actions that did not account
for potentially volatile responses/reactions from their partners. They con-
stantly strategized for survival.

Help for the women in this study reflected attempts to access, validate,
and bolster what was perceived as their personal control. Well-intentioned
help that was reported as negative in its consequences denied these women
the power of their own definitions.

It is both ironic and paradoxical that the most efficacious assistance
provided by helpers was to honor the women's often long and frequently
frustrating definition-making processes. Helpers had to assist abused
women in developing coping and problem-solving strategies for the short
term, while maintaining and reiterating their definitions of the abuse as
intentional, deliberate, and dangerous (Chang 1989; Lempert 1995).

CONCLUSION

Disclosure of abuse transformed private troubles into public woes
(Mills 1959). Telling others was a significant social act because it ended
the "fiction of intimacy" (Tifft 1993) by making the women's experiences
of abuse public, by changing their perceptions of their relationships, and
by altering others' definitions of them and their partners (Loseke 1987).

Although not immediately consequential to the respondents, telling others connected the micro world of violent interactions with the macro constructions of gender, power, and knowledge. It linked their lived experiences of intimate violence with public policies and social constructions of "abuse". These battered women's stories, events, and episodes of violence carried layers of meaning, nuance, substance, and "fabric" (Denzin 1989a). By analytically 'peeling' the layers the normative knowledge and control structures underlying intimate violence was uncovered. Because power permeates every structure of society, it is deeply embedded in the micro gender relations of family and in the interactive relations of informal help-seeking/help-provision. Power and the ability to define are intimately related, that is, those with personal and/or social power can create and impose their definitions of the situation on others. These respondents reported vying with both their partners and their help providers over the power to define themselves and their intimate relationships. In contradictory arenas, they struggled for control of the definitions of their experiences. By revealing the help-seeking and help-provision consequences of these "reality definition contests" (Loseke 1992), analytical attention and social support can be redirected to abuse as the problem, not the women's resistance to definitional oppression as the problem.

When abused women's experiences and the meanings they attach to them are available to formal and informal helpers, understanding can be generated and tolerance expanded. With better understanding of how battered women interpret their experiences and how well-intentioned assistance efforts can produce negative consequences, informal helpers, shelter providers, police, medical practitioners, social workers, and others will be more likely to develop better applied interventions to address both immediate needs, as identified by the women, and broader issues for social change.

Failure to account for the perspectives of the women results in assistance built on theory, ideology, and/or prior conceptualizations that are not consonant with battered women's lived experience. *"The perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by applied programs must be grasped, interpreted, and understood if solid, effective, applied programs are to be put into place"* (Denzin 1989a:105, emphasis in original).

By contextualizing abused women's help seeking processes within the simultaneity of love and violence, this analysis rejects the simple binary of abusive relationships and illustrates the multi-dimensionality of the interactions and the complexity of interactions with informal helpers. It further suggests that previous theorizing about abused women has been deficient in accounting for women's own social constructions of their relationships. This analysis suggests some reconceptualizations of women's actions that

recognize that their definition-making processes occur within contradictory definitional frames. Finally, this work challenges conventional assistance models, in which the power to decide what constitutes help and support for abused women has remained largely in the hands of involved activists reacting to institutionalized violence against women.

The conditions for understanding the experiences and expressions of the private troubles presented here may help to clarify how interpretations and understandings formulated, implemented, and given meaning by abused women suggest further research directions. This analysis suggests reconceptualizations of "help" in the development of more effective informal interventions, as well as in applied programs and solutions for the social problem of intimate violence against women.

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