Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes July 11, 2017

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Minutes by Kate Sackett, edited by Chris Huffine

Discussion topic: The Big Picture: Macro interventions and issues in domestic violence

Much of the focus of batterer intervention programming (as well as other institutions such as the criminal justice system and child welfare) is on how to intervene with abusive individuals. This makes sense since this is where we primarily focus on helping abusive partners to change. While this is important, there's a danger of falling into the belief that domestic violence is solely the result of the actions of abusive individuals and overlooking the larger social and institutional structures and values that also play a significant role in domestic violence—either the encouragement or cessation of it. As stated by one character in the movie "Spotlight"—"they say it takes a village to raise a child. I think it takes a village to abuse a child as well." The focus of today's discussion is to identify and examine these larger macro issues/structures that play a significant role in either encouraging or discouraging domestic violence perpetration. It is intended to remind us that it is absolutely vital that we not only intervene on the micro/individual level, but on the macro/societal level as well.

One way to bring a macro perspective into the group-level work is to bring language into the group of "social constructs," so that individual work is framed not as an individual problem alone. The power and control wheel and the diagram of institutions that come down to the individual in the center also illustrates this, where social constructs are funneled through institutions down to the individual. A copy of this institutional/social power and control wheel is attached to these minutes.

The most common construct we typically talk about in group is masculinity, which is not hard-wired but learned through socialization. Those who embrace traditional masculine qualities (while simultaneously rejecting traditional feminine qualities) tend to be more abusive to their partners, even in same-sex relationships. The "man box" exercise is one way to work on this construct in groups. Another common way is by asking members to name characteristics of a good man, of a good father, and of a good husband/partner. In one group, the men generated stereotypes about being providers, protectors, teachers, strong, etc. and this led to a discussion that many of the characteristics of traditional masculinity are tied to a military model that prepared men for the military (e.g., not showing emotion).

Male privilege is also a macro issue that can be addressed and its relationship to the oppression of women. This is not just a problem in the United States, it is a global problem that stems from beliefs dating back at least 7800 years about what men and women are and how they should relate to one another. How roles are defined and gendered is one aspect that contributes to male privilege and the oppression of women.

In some of the BIP curricula currently being marketed (e.g., MRT-DV, ACT-V, Strength at Home), there is no mention or little focus on male privilege, masculinity, oppression, or gender socialization. Some organizing groups in the field are very uncomfortable with discussing larger social constructs such as oppression and related concepts. There is also a growing trend for BIP providers to be trained as mental health professionals, which, by nature of their mental health training, tends to focus on the individual/micro level of the issue.

One challenge in talking about male privilege is that while men in the group may have that form of privilege, they may also suffer from other forms of oppression such as racism or classism. Their personal experiences of oppression may make it more difficult for them to see and acknowledge the privilege they still gain as males. This is also a challenge when working with female abusive partners. Rather than assuming a single, universal curriculum will fit everyone, population-specific curricula are really vital to address the different dynamics of abuse for different groups as well as intersectionality with different experiences of power, privilege, and oppression. In social justice conversations, we need to embrace cognitive dissonance when validating the experiences of one population and not fall into a trap of assuming validating one group necessarily invalidates the experience of a different population.

We can invoke a macro lens by asking why are there a large number of men who are not violent? Why are there large groups of women who are traumatized and could act out from that trauma, but do not become violent? Many women are in the “Act Like a Lady” box (e.g., being relational, communicative), just as men are in the “Act Like a Man” box. One attendee wondered whether bringing equality to genders means taking away gender roles. For example, instead of asking what does it mean to be a good man, should we be asking what does it mean to be a good human being or person? It was mentioned by another that many of the qualities that support being non-abusive (e.g., having compassion, empathy, being relational) are typically considered to be traditionally “feminine” which is one reason why males are far more likely to act out their distress violently than females are.

A higher-level intervention includes economic and other empowerment of women. The dynamics of domestic violence usually involve victims being “hostages” to the abuse (e.g., economically, physically, religiously)—not only are they being abused, but other factors present make it difficult for them to get themselves safe and effectively set boundaries protecting themselves (and their children) from the violence. Therefore another key aspect of reducing domestic

violence is empowering women. Unfortunately, larger institutional forces are systematically dis-empowering women and putting them at higher risk of abuse (e.g., de-funding social support and health systems such as Planned Parenthood, WIC, and domestic violence resources). We see this dynamic play out repeatedly in various other groups where it is far easier for the more powerful group to be and get away with being abusive (e.g., teachers, ministers, bosses) than the less powerful group (e.g., students, children, employees).

The shifting stance of the USA on immigration has also impacted these dynamics. Spanish-speaking services were previously being utilized in shelters, advocacy groups, and BIP providers at increasing rates, but fear of deportation prevents undocumented immigrants (and their loved ones) from accessing DV services. The solution here again is empowerment, including economic, legal, and intellectual empowerment. As you empower groups who are most at risk for being abused (i.e., those with the least amount of economic, political, and other power), rates of domestic violence decline. Rates of perpetrators' actions may not actually be declining, but victims are more able to stop the abuse or leave abusive situations when they have more power. Institutional empowerment may be unreliable though, as social progress often comes with backlash, so lasting social empowerment may require thinking beyond those institutional supports alone.

Supporting men to challenge traditional masculinity and sexism can also involve showing them the harms of adhering to traditional norms of masculinity (e.g., health consequences, substance abuse, stress, mental health issues, risk of suicide). This helps them gain awareness for why they need to change.

An additional macro issue is the widespread ignorance of domestic violence. Most people do not understand what domestic violence is and have only narrow and/or stereotypical ideas of what it is (e.g., extreme physical abuse that causes injury). Raising awareness is a significant part of the larger social change needed. Our US cultural myths and models, like rugged individualism, also encourage victim-blaming and prevent people from understanding what the dynamics of domestic violence really are and how to end cycles of abuse. Recognizing all forms of violence as violence is also an important piece of this work. The classic phrase to describe this change process is consciousness raising. As people become better informed about what constitutes domestic violence then they are more likely to see it in their own lives and the lives of others and then take appropriate actions. On the other hand, with limited understanding, domestic violence can literally hide in plain sight without anyone naming it, understanding it, or addressing it.

Folks within the field are doing what they can through education to challenge narrow and stereotypical understandings of domestic violence. Advocates are working locally here with middle schools to educate and raise awareness for youth, but it is a struggle to figure out how to reach younger children. There is also a struggle between educating kids and taking away their

innocence, especially around relationships and sexuality, and some parents do not want their children to be taught content that runs against their values.

Having these conversations challenges not only privilege but asks us to really look deeply at how we live our lives and move in the world. It is difficult to have these conversations and to address this complex issue, and movement has to come from specific moments especially that grab public attention and mobilize action (e.g., the OJ Simpson trial and passage of VAWA). How can we craft our messages to reach many different populations, including those that are different than ours? How can you discuss masculinity, privilege and power in a way that reaches men from a range of political backgrounds?

It is not enough to talk to the men in the program to help them change, but we also need to encourage them to talk about it with other people in their lives. By doing this BIPs can affect not only the abusive men they directly work with, but ripple out to other people in their communities. Providers have definitely seen indications of this when men voluntarily seek out services after being encouraged by a friend or family member who has already been through such services.

A macro lens can also be applied to the broader context of BIP group members' lives. One thing that can promote relapse is the lack of support that people have after they complete a program when they go back into their regular social context. They can backslide, hearing subtle messages in that context that say it is okay to be abusive. This highlights how BIPs alone are not responsible for the success or failure of the abusive men they work with. If a formerly abusive partner is in a community that actively supports him remaining non-abusive he is more likely to succeed than if he is in a community that actively supports him returning to abusive and controlling behaviors (e.g., attending a church that encourages male dominance and female submission, listening to misogynistic music, etc.).

It is also important to consider the connection between economic and social distress. Countries with greater unequal wealth also tend to have greater social distress, which is linked to greater and more severe domestic violence. The USA is one of the more economically inequitable countries in the world and has higher rates of domestic violence than countries like Japan and Norway which have substantially lower levels of unequal wealth. Again, economic empowerment and economic justice is an important aspect of social justice and decreasing rates of domestic violence. This is compounded again by social norms and the construct of traditional masculinity, when men who cannot provide for their families internalize that as failing to be a real man and then use power and control to bolster their masculinity and self-image.

Stress, alcohol, and other factors can also mitigate or escalate domestic violence, founded on a pro-abuse belief system and lack of true respect for their partner (not just being polite but

acknowledging and recognizing the humanity of their partner). Similarly, poverty can influence (but does not cause) domestic violence.

A macro lens can also help providers see the community as their client, not the individual alone. The goal then is not just helping individuals change, but communities to change. One general question BIPs could be asking themselves is "how are we helping to encourage community change?" Some actions that might fit with this include offering free community training, providing information about domestic violence (beyond simply promoting programming) through their website and brochures, and offering free consultation to local organizations (e.g., doctor offices, counseling centers, etc.).

The most relevant concept in the DV field related to all of this is the development of the Duluth Model which identified the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) as a key factor in helping to stop domestic violence, with programing for abusive partners (e.g., the Duluth curriculum) just one small slice of that larger pie. Coordinated community collusion can excuse, hide, and/or promote abuse. The most common conceptualization of the CCR limits it to the criminal justice system: typically including law enforcement, the courts, probation, child welfare, providers, and advocates. It is vital that we expand our conceptualization of the CCR to all aspects of the community, not just the parts that are dealing with illegal abuse. This community includes schools, healthcare, employers, social structures, and others, not only those agencies, organizations, and individuals who directly respond to domestic violence. This broader coordinated response beyond the criminal justice response alone happens in other social contexts like for addiction and other problems, but not as much for domestic violence. For example, providers or others could do training for employers about how to recognize and respond to signs of domestic violence in the workplace.

Some of the larger social ills of the world are rooted in the same belief system that drives domestic violence. For example, the relationship with the environment in the United States is based on dominating and controlling the environment. We need to recognize we are the environment, and the environment is us. We need to collaborate with, work with, be open and curious about what is going on in the environment, rather than trying to control and extort it. These values (controlling, exploiting) are perpetrating most forms of violence in the world. The same belief systems need to change to address all of these varied social ills.