

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes February 11th, 2013

Attendance

Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Debbie Tomasovic (A Better Way Counseling), Jennifer Warren (Seeds of Change/Allies in Change), Katherine Stansbury (Turning Points/ChangePoint), Jennifer Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Guruseva Mason, Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Kelly Bresinski (DHS-Child Welfare), Joan Scott (Allies in Change/SoValTi), Regina Rosann (ARMS), Linda Castaneda (Manley Interventions), Andrew Altman (Multnomah County Corrections DV unit), Emmy Ritter (Raphael House)

Minutes by Wendy Viola, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: How to address pro-violence messages in the media.

Men's choices to be non-abusive are contrary to societal pro-violence pressures that are laced throughout the media. How do we address this issue of a pro-violence culture?

An example of a manifestation of our culture's pro-violence attitude is an advertisement for a divorce lawyer promising to help men "take control" of divorce settlements. Another example of a pro-violence image from the media is the "mud-flap woman" or "chrome woman." This particular image can be plastered on anything, implying ownership through men's ability to put this woman anywhere they want. One man came into a group with the mud-flap woman on the top of his shoes. The image is so pervasive that only one participant even pretended to understand why the image is problematic. Instead of emphasizing that the image is wrong "because it objectifies women," it would be more effective to point out that it is problematic because it reduces women to a single quality, often a physical quality. The ability to recognize this reduction of women to a single quality reflects media literacy. There's a bit of a counter-culture around the chrome woman in particular, specifically, images in which she is holding a book. An entrée to this conversation might be bringing this counter-culture image into the group, and asking participants why others have considered the original image problematic.

Facilitators could also make the conversation more personal, by asking participants how they objectify their partner, or the objectification to which their daughters or nieces may be subjected.

It is important to keep emphasizing the violent cultural values of America, despite how invisible it sometimes seems. In some instances, an entire group of people can agree that we live in a violent culture, without acknowledging that it's problematic. Generally speaking, the problems of living in a violent culture are a relatively easy point to make. The men who are becoming more accountable and starting to work the program begin to

realize how pervasive cultural values supporting violence are in our culture and why it is problematic.

Participants often try to justify acting abusively, and media portrayals of violence and the situations in which it occurs may be used to further justify abuse. In movies, what differentiates the good guys from the bad guys is not their use of violence, but the motivation or justification of their violence: the good guys have “good” reasons for being violent (e.g., self-defense, saving the life of another). This point can be used as a lead-in to asking “how do you justify your abuse?” It’s not just that people base their behavior on the media, but that the media is a reflection of our behavior.

Some young women justify their partners’ violence for them (e.g. “I was out of control,” “I need to be controlled”), changing their perceptions of reality to match those of their abusers. One sub-group of young women reflecting this perspective are involved with gang families and are surrounded by violence. They may not be able to visualize a future that is not violent, and finding a partner to protect them may seem like the best option. If they leave their abusive partners, they’ll likely still be exposed to violence. These young women often normalize each other’s victimization and reinforce the glamour and cache associated with having been arrested or having inflicted violence. Young people’s exposure to violence is not only impacted by the media, but the way that they justify violence to each other.

Part of what allows men to be abusive is their limited thinking about what happens after the abuse. The media rarely shows the impact of violence on characters’ lives. Perpetrators rarely get what they want after an abusive episode. Instead, they get partners who are more distant and insincere. The media never shows this physical or emotional fall-out from violence. Questions that could be asked in a group could include: “Let’s talk some more about how or why this movie is a fantasy. How does this work in real life? What would the after-effects of this violence be in real life?”

Because reality TV is supposed to represent reality, violence portrayed on reality TV may be more validating than violence in the context of fiction. Some of the more realistic shows are the ones that have a lot of violence, but portray it in a way that communicates anti-violence, often by showing the fall-out of violence. For example, *The Sopranos* portrayed a lot of violence, but had an anti-violence message.

It’s more realistic that participants will become aware and critical of violent media than eliminating their access to media completely. A central goal is to get men to think critically about the pro-violence values that they see in the media. It’s similar to people doing sobriety work: we live in a pro-addiction culture. People who are trying to stay sober can’t remove themselves from the pro-addiction culture, but they can become aware of this culture and more critical of it. Media literacy is therefore an important skill to teach participants. However, this is much more relevant for men who are farther along

in the program, are more willfully embracing more pro-social attitudes, and are asking themselves “what would the group think about this?”

It can be helpful to bring in media clips to spark discussion. *The Simpsons* is very fertile, and can make the group lighter and more fun, which can bring in the people who disassociate during the group when it becomes too intense or too personal.

Empirically, men who affiliate with pro-violent peers have a greater likelihood for re-offense. Similar to how groups ought to encourage men to be more thoughtful about with whom they spend time, BIPs should also encourage participants to be selective about the media that they expose themselves to. Just as some men switch churches when they realize that certain congregations espouse pro-violent attitudes, they should also be inclined to change the media that they expose themselves to. For example, one group member noticed that he was listening to a talk-radio host whose views agreed with his own but whose style was inflammatory, which led to him getting verbally abusive. In hindsight, he was able to identify that listening to this particular talk radio show led him to make the choices that he did.

Even if you purge yourself of violent media, the media is saturated with messages that objectify women. An especially problematic motif is the “battle of the sexes”. Though contrived, competition among women is also problematic, representing horizontal aggression: once the oppressor gets the oppressed to fight among each other, their work is done.

In the media right now, there are many more images of men as emotional, more complete people, who are non-violent, non-controlling, and maintaining healthy relationships. It may be helpful to ask: what are the positive representations of women in the media? What are the positive representations of men? Point participants in the direction of these shows or movies. In *Deep Space Nine*, for example, a male character is shown being affectionate with his son and expressing emotions. Providers can assign homework that involves bringing in examples of commercials that portray men or women in either positive or negative ways.

The people who really tune into the problem of violence in the media and continue bringing it up are often parents who want their children to have better lives. One way to encourage participants to consider the ways that media seeps in and effects their thinking is to ask them about the impact of exposure to violence on their children. It seems like a natural thing to some participants to expose their children to their own perpetration of violence.

Regarding the use of pornography or erotica: the issue may not be whether it’s good or bad, but how its consumption affects participants’ relationships with real people and how

it's translated into appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Censorship may be less important than how or whether exposure influences behavior.

Avatars are also becoming popular. Avatars allow you to invent your own character and interact with other people as that character online.

When we're feeling bad, we latch onto things that validate and comfort us. BIP participants often feel badly about themselves, and have the option of behaving in ways that are either self-compassionate or encourage them to "screw it," which often turns into "screw you." These can be thought of in terms of self-care versus emotional intensity. Seeking out media sources that heighten emotional intensity is not practicing good self-care. Being cognizant of our state of mind and the motivation for seeking out specific media sources can be helpful. Similarly, we tend to seek out information about something we don't know much about, and then become so immersed in it that it impacts our emotional intensity. Staying aware of emotional intensity is crucial for learning how to bring it down.