

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes-2/20/2007

Present: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Diana Groener (Allies in Change), Dean Camarda (Men's Resource Center, Allies in Change), Paul Lee (Men's Resource Center), Michael Crowe (Choices), Jessica Duke (Oregon Public Health Division), Regina Rosann (Abuse Recovery Ministry Services), Stacey Womack (ARMS), Paula Manley (Manley Interventions), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Jennifer Warren (Men's Resource Center/Women's Counseling Center), Debbie Tomasovic (Allies in Change), Jeff Hastings (ARMS), Linda Neyman (student), Songcha Bowman (Multicultural Counseling Services), Anita Vinson (West Women's & Children's Shelter), Sheila Riley (West Women's & Children's Shelter), Christina Nicolaidis (OHSU), Phillip Broyles (ARMS), Liz Carey (Allies in Change), Brad Peterson (Allies in Change, A New Life Christian Counseling), Jacquie Pancoast (Change Point)

Minutes by Chris Huffine (who gave up his Saturday morning editing/typing this thing up)

Meeting Discussion Topic: Gender Symmetry in Domestic Violence

-It is widely accepted among many of us that domestic violence is primarily perpetrated by men against women. Various crime victim studies, phone surveys, and other studies/reports typically report that 85-95% of perpetrators of domestic violence are males while 85-95% of victims of domestic violence are females. However, over a hundred studies have found equal levels of domestic violence between men and women (to review a compilation of these studies, compiled by Martin Fiebert, go to <http://www.csulb.edu/~mfiebert/assault.htm>). A number of websites also are dedicated to talking about how men are as abused as women and women are as abusive as men. This is no longer just being found on "father's rights" or "men's rights" websites, but is becoming an increasingly mainstream belief. For example, no less than the president of the American Psychological Association appears to embrace this view (read a column from October, 2006, ironically, DV awareness month, here: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct06/pc.html>). Likewise, Wikipedia, an increasingly popular website featuring a "People's encyclopedia" defines "spousal abuse" as almost completely gender equal. Here's that link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spousal_abuse. Even the entry for "domestic violence", while better written, has a significant subsection discussing gender equity: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic_violence. Our discussion today is intended to examine these trends, make sense of them, and how to address them in our work and public education.

-Disclaimer: This discussion is intended to focus on DV within heterosexual relationships. It is acknowledged that DV appears to be as common in same sex relationships as heterosexual relationships, but many of the comments made at this meeting were focused on heterosexual relationships.

-One member reported that in Clark County (Washington) almost 1 out of 3 DV arrests is a female. Many of these women do appear to have significant control issues. However, she wonders if this reflects, in part, past trauma that has led them to become more controlling.

Likewise, some of these women can be quite abusive. Do these women have power and control issues or are they simply being reactive to their environment?

-Another member distinguished between power and control issues in which one person is attempting to control another and control tactics in which specific controlling behaviors are used to win an argument.

-A popular view (among the general public) is that women are being controlled to try to change their partners.

-It was pointed out that even when women are being abusive or controlling their male partners are less likely to have a fear of their partner, in contrast to what many women report.

-It was mentioned that rather than describing it as gender equity, it should be described as gender symmetry. The distinction is that they aren't necessarily the same in terms of their abuse, simply that there is an argument that there are similar rates of abuse in each gender.

-One critique of many of the 100+ studies that have found symmetry is that they tend to look at specific behaviors within the general population, without considering the larger context of that abuse. For example, there is evidence that many of the female perpetrated domestic homicides of men occur within the larger context of the woman being repeatedly battered by that man. The reverse--women who are murdered by their current/former partner having repeatedly battered him does not appear to be nearly as common.

-As violence becomes less severe it tends to become more gender symmetrical.

-We need to differentiate between normative abuse/control (i.e., that is fairly common among the general population--the sorts of behaviors many of us do) from the more pathological use of abuse that characterizes what we typically describe as domestic violence.

-When male group members bring up issues/arguments about gender symmetry it is often not to engage in a thoughtful discussion about this issue, but a dodge to avoid looking at their own abusive behavior and to avoid accountability. To that extent, when dealing with abusive men in groups, gender symmetry is irrelevant--the focus needs to be on what they have done that was inappropriate. But what about people outside of the group who raise the issue of gender symmetry? For example, what should the response be at classes/training when people ask about female perpetrators?

-It is important that hierarchy and patriarchy are acknowledged. Male privilege and patriarchy are still often not adequately considered and taken into account on the role they play. In general, males have more power and privilege within our culture, which may help mitigate/exasperate the abuse. In speaking of gender symmetry, the role of male privilege and patriarchy may be lost.

-Hierarchy, privilege and patriarchy are part of the larger context which needs to be considered. Not all abuse is the same nor does it have the same impact. A student being abused by a teacher has fewer resources and the impact may therefore be more severe than a teacher being abused by a student. Likewise, because men typically have more extensive access to resources (e.g., physical size, financial, general status) the impact of abuse done to them by their partner may be less than their abuse to a female partner. Besides the actual abuse being done, we need to consider the power differential between the perpetrator and the victim. The greater the power differential between perpetrator and victim (e.g., physically, economically, status, etc) the more difficult it will be for the victim to effectively resist or challenge the abuse of the perpetrator. One example of this is children who abuse their parents. While children commit acts of abuse of their parents at every age, it is only when they become physically stronger, larger, or otherwise have true power over their parent that it becomes a true issue of concern. Young children and toddlers do lots of abuse to their parents, but the power differential makes it easy for the victim (i.e., the parent) to intervene. This is less true with teens, particularly older/larger teens. Parents typically have the least amount of power relative to their children once the parents become elderly, which is where there is the greatest concern for children abusing their parents, even though such abuse can occur at any point in the relationship.

-Related to the above, most gender symmetry studies do not adequately consider the impact of the abuse. For example, getting “hit” in the arm by a woman who is emphasizing her point and using the back of her hand is different than getting “hit” in the nose by a man 50 pounds larger using his full force, a closed fist, and ultimately breaking the nose. We need to consider not only what the abuse was, but what the impact on the victim was. Being punched by a 3 year old does not have the same impact, typically, as being punched by a 23 year old.

-Another member cautioned against automatically vilifying hierarchy. Hierarchy is not automatically a bad thing. It becomes a bad thing when it is non-consensual. Consensual hierarchies, where there is appropriate use of the power can be good things, as illustrated by many teacher-led classes, management run workplaces, etc.

-The most commonly and widely used assessment tool by researchers of abusive behavior is the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) developed by Strauss and Gelles. The strongest critique of this tool is that it basically equates all physical abuse without considering the impact or severity. In the above example, each person would receive the same score on the CTS.

-It was observed by one member who works with both male and female perpetrators that while she teaches males and females the same skill sets, females don't seem to have as much success using the skills they're being taught with their male partners as the men do. Her interpretation is that while many of the men's partners, when approached appropriately, are willing to be collaborative, the women's partners are less willing to be collaborative, even when approached appropriately.

-We may be doing a disservice to characterize victims as having no power in the relationship--as

being powerless. They do have some power and that needs to be acknowledged. For example, there is a subgroup of DV victims who classify themselves as “fighters” and don’t appreciate being labeled as victims. They sometimes seek help for their own power and control issues.

-Some of the women may do lots of abuse within the relationship, but even then it is rare that they truly have more power in the relationship. Likewise, many of them are still not coming from a “power over” perspective. This is something else that is rarely examined in studies that find gender symmetry--what is the larger world view/belief set of the abuser, particularly regarding power and relationship. It was suggested that many more male abusers have a world view of “power over” compared to female abusers who are still more prone to viewing the world from a stance of “personal power”.

-One batterer intervention style is to only focus on the attitudes and beliefs and not on the behaviors and stories. From this view we don’t need to comment on the particular behaviors or the stories told about the behaviors. What matters is the underlying attitudes and beliefs about power. Unless those underlying beliefs change, any behavioral changes will be temporary or will simply lead to new manifestations of the same underlying beliefs. It was suggested that pro-abuse/controlling belief sets are far more common among men than women.

-One member who works with both male and female abusers said that she finds more of the women to already have a “personal power” world view. They are struggling more with setting boundaries and being assertive. She has observed that their abusive behaviors tend to diminish much more quickly when confronted than those of the men she works with.

-One challenge of empirical research into these issues has been developing a measure that goes beyond individual behaviors/actions to integrate the context/intent/impact of the behavior. As of now, no such measures exist. The ones that are being used (e.g., CTS) rarely consider any of the above.

-Approximately 10-15 years ago Michael Johnson came up with a classification system to address some of these issues. He identified three categories of abuse:

- 1) **Intimate terrorism:** typically used by someone to overpower another--classic battering
- 2) **Violent resistance:** typically used by the victim who is being overpowered by the other (e.g., secondary aggressors)
- 3) **Situational aggression/Common couples violence:** the more widespread discrete acts of abuse which are not about power and control and don’t form a larger pattern. This is presumably what many of the gender symmetry studies are actually focusing on.

However, while this classification makes sense and is consistent with some of the points made earlier, there has been little research to empirically support it. This is due to there being no good measure to identify the underlying controlling beliefs and attitudes that are presumably present in

the perpetrators of intimate terrorism and the victims of violent resistance (and presumably absent in the victims of intimate terrorism, the perpetrators of violence resistance and couples using situational aggression).

-One member suggested that all abusers are not the same. Perhaps some fit the above pattern but perhaps some do not.

-Summing up several points made earlier, when examining abusive behavior, it's important to not only look at the specific behavior, but to also consider the context (e.g., secondary aggression), intent (e.g., to control the other?), and impact (e.g., does it create fear or any true pain or suffering) of that behavior.

-However, even then, the above qualities are not necessarily present. For example, studies have been done of attempted femicides--where serious attempts have been made by a current or former romantic partner on a woman's life, but she has survived. When these women were interviewed about their partner some described classic patterns of abuse, world view, etc. However, some reported that they did not see him as having power and control issues, that he was not particularly dominating, that they were not in fear of him. This makes it clear that it's all far more complicated than we think.

-Related to the intent is examining how the perpetrator views the partner/relationship. Is it viewed as a collaborative relationship? Are any power differentials consensual? Is the relationship viewed as being collaborative or combative?

-It has been suggested that one reason why crime stats are not symmetrical is that male victims may be less likely to report their victimization. However, if that were so, then there should be greater symmetry in domestic homicides since it is much more difficult to conceal the causes of a murder. However, a significant majority of domestic homicides are committed by males. Further supporting the concept of a fair amount of women's violence being secondary aggression against a batterer are the trends of domestic homicide. In the past 25 years as there has been an increased focus on domestic violence the rate of male domestic homicides has dropped much more dramatically than the rate of female domestic homicides (which has had a more modest decline). The common explanation given is that more interventions are happening earlier in the battering process (e.g., arrest, shelter) so that a victim is not resorting to murder. There also continue to be significantly higher rates of female domestic murderers having been battered whereas that appears to be a non-issue among male domestic murderers.

-This raises the point, related to context, that it is important to differentiate between women who are using violence against an abuser vs. women who are being abusive to a non-abusive partner. A related danger is victim blaming when looking at either person's abuse--the idea that it "takes two to tango".

-Further complicating all of this is the tendency of perpetrators to do a lot of blaming, external

focusing, and taking little responsibility for their behavior. At the same time, victims tend to be quicker to take personal responsibility for the abuse in the relationship (e.g., what was my role in this abuse?) Those who work with both male and female perpetrators report that female perpetrators are typically quicker to take responsibility for their actions than male perpetrators.

-One challenge is how do we integrate all of this information, some of it seemingly contradictory and then approach it in a non-defensive manner.

-One thing not mentioned at all yet today is the cultural component of all of this. It is less clear to what extent or how any of this applies to communities of color or other cultural groups. Cultural issues may further complicate all of this.

-One key point not yet raised is that many of those who are pushing for a gender symmetry view appear intent to remove the role of gender and gender socialization in domestic violence. It is an attempt to keep the dominant culture and patriarchal values in place and unexamined. All would agree that there are male victims and female perpetrators who need attention/services, but that is not enough for most of those pushing gender symmetry (in contrast, for example, those who are pushing for gay rights who have never attempted to claim there are as many GLBTQs as there are heterosexuals and don't need to get equal rights). They are attempting to remove any aspect of gender socialization or related issues. This is an alarming and dangerous trend in the eyes of some members since many believe that gender socialization, privilege, and patriarchy play key roles in domestic violence (and are clearly emphasized in Oregon batterer intervention provider standards). Also, regardless of the truth of gender symmetry in domestic violence, there is no question that virtually every other type of violence behavior (e.g., homicide, sexual assault, robbery) is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, often with the majority of victims also being males--only in domestic violence and sexual assault are the majority of victims NOT males.

-It is important that we need to consider the value of both academic and "front line" views of this issue as well as other domestic violence issues. Academics and researchers can offer more objective, empirically based information and statistics--including examining whether the data truly supports various perspectives or philosophical views. Front line folks--those who are working directly with individual men and women--can offer a more qualitative and, at times, more complex/sophisticated perspective on what is actually happening in the "real world".

-There appears to be a bit of a backlash against the more traditional feminist views/analysis of domestic violence at this time. However, inevitably the pendulum will swing the other way.

-Here are a few studies that rebut the gender symmetry analysis, some of which make some of the same points others have made in the discussion today:

Dasgupta, S. (2002). A framework for understanding women's use of non-lethal violence in intimate heterosexual relationships. *Violence Against Women*, 8, 1364-1389.

Henning, K. & Feder, L. (2004). A comparison of men and women arrested for domestic

- violence: Who presents the greater threat? *Journal of Family Violence*, 19, 69-80.
- Kimmel, M. (2002). Gender symmetry in domestic violence. *Violence Against Women*, 8, 1332-1363.
- Melton, H.C. & Belknap, J. (2003). Assessing gender differences and similarities in officially reported intimate partner violence. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 30, 328-348.
- Saunders, D. G. (2002). Are physical assaults by wives and girlfriends a major social problem? *Violence Against Women*, 8, 1424-1448.
- Swan, S. et al. (2005). An empirical examination of a theory of women's use of violence in intimate relationships. *U.S. Dept of Justice*, Document No. 208611.