

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network meeting 7/18/2006

Present: Jennifer Warren (Men's Resource Center/Women's Counseling Center), Debbie Tomasovic (Allies in Change), Paula Manley (Manley Interventions), Stacey Womack (Abuse Recovery Ministry and Services), Regina Rosann (Abuse Recovery Ministry and Services), Michael Crowe (Choices), Brad Peterson (A New Life Christian Counseling), Cindy Lyndin, William Warren (City of Portland Crime Prevention), Diana Groener (Allies in Change), Chris Huffine (Allies in Change)

Minutes by Jennifer Warren and Debbie Tomasovic, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: The Larger Social Context of Domestic Violence:
Systems and Organizations That Embrace and Support Power and Control

-The focus of the discussion today is intended not to be on individual perpetrators, but the larger social structures and institutions that support abuse and collude with it. The intent is to focus on the macro level rather than the micro level.

-The original catalyst for this discussion occurred during an earlier discussion of workplace violence. It was observed that pro-abuse workplace structures that support domestic violence often go unquestioned. In a system such as this victims can be systematically oppressed and sought out.

-Certain religious faiths support power over. For example, one member spoke of being raised in an Evangelical Christian home which supported the "power over" structure.

-Another more general systematic trend that supports domestic violence are general power differentials such as patriarchy/sexism. These power differentials allow violence to thrive. Abusive behavior of any kind is often done by those with power against those who do not. For example, teachers generally harass students (and not the reverse), therapists abuse patients, police abuse civilians, etc. When there is not a power differential it is easier to stop the abuse and hold the abuser accountable.

-Women can be just as willing and able in some cases to enable this patriarchal culture, through internalized oppression. However, it is important to recognize that women are not to blame for this social structure and don't necessarily have the power to end their victimization.

-The groups that have more power also have the moral responsibility to not abuse that power. The current generation thinks of this from the Spiderman movies: "With great power comes great responsibility".

-World War II created opportunities not previously available for women ("Rosie the Riveter") and African Americans, among others. After the war women went back to the former structure,

whereas within the African American community were planted the seeds of the Civil Rights movement (which later inspired the second wave of feminism, gay rights, etc).

-Another systematic element in sustaining violence is pop culture. “Tough Guise” by Jackson Katz focuses extensively on this. Often women are portrayed as subservient and as primarily sexual objects. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with portraying women as sexual creatures, but it becomes harmful when that is the only way they are portrayed, the only way they are valued, rather than offering a more full portrayal of the many qualities of women. Popcorn Venus is a book which looks at how women were portrayed during the 50’s--the Madonna/whore dichotomy.

-Aspects of the legal system also reinforce power over. For example, our court system is set up to be oppositional and combative. The court system can easily be used as a tool to control others, especially among the wealthy.

-Another systematic problem is the tendency to only think of domestic violence in its more extreme and less common form--physical abuse--while being dismissive and overlooking the more subtle (and common and widespread) forms of abuse (e.g., control, verbal abuse, psychological). Most of the laws are against physical abuse while most other forms of abuse are not illegal.

-Some people with power and control issues are attracted to jobs in which they can exercise their use of power. For example, there is an above average level of domestic violence among police officers. Many people with power and control issues in the workplace display those in the home as well.

-DHS-Child Welfare can be quite controlling at times, in inappropriate ways. For example, they may require an extensive list of things to do to regain custody of the children, only to add additional items later. While some caseworkers can be fair and reasonable, others take advantage of their role to do power plays with people (often women) on their caseload.

-The legal system can also unwittingly further victimize DV victims. For example, no contact orders may increase the financial and familial burden on victims. Extensive treatment requirements may also drain families of money they need for other expenses. Mandatory arrests followed by quick releases and no prosecution may actually increase the risk of further abuse.

-Women can also play a role in this system. They may blame themselves and other women for these problems. They may become verbally abusive towards themselves or other women.

-Universities and other closed systems (e.g., military) are motivated to be seen as “safe” and may tend to discourage the reporting of violence or understate it to perpetuate the (false) sense of safety. Various cultural (e.g., racial groups, neighborhoods, extended families, etc) groups have a similar orientation where they often want to think of themselves as “not having a problem with

domestic violence--it doesn't happen within our community". This helps sustain and perpetuate it by creating greater isolation of victims and lowered accountability of perpetrators.

-Some perpetrators are quick to misperceive others as doing power plays when they really aren't. Systems which have individuals who are abusive and controlling help perpetuate these distortions and allow for their overgeneralization. For example, many probation officers who are not making inappropriate use of their power over offenders may be falsely portrayed as doing so. On the other hand, those probation officers that do make inappropriate use of their power reinforce the distorted view of some perpetrators that the entire system is abusive and controlling.

-One positive trend is the increased use of peer mediation and conflict resolution skills training within schools, particularly elementary schools. These programs are implicitly encouraging using personal power while discouraging the use of violence to resolve issues. Such programs were fairly rare a generation ago.

-Another factor that certainly contributes to being more abusive is living in a culture of fear. In particular, the culture of fear of being taken advantage of or victimized. This orientation, an implicit assumption of the traditional male gender role, is widespread in the U.S. This fear of being taken advantage of/hurt then justifies being abusive and controlling. This theme was explored extensively in the movie "Bowling for Columbine". That movie (which was heavily influenced by a book about the same topic, but with a different name) concluded that the primary reason why the U.S. leads the world in handgun deaths is because of how much this country lives in a culture of fear.

-The solution to the above is to explore more closely what we are afraid of to see if there is any truth to it. Often there is not. It's akin to turning on the light in the closet to see what's really there rather than fearing what may be hidden in the darkness.

-Already alluded to, and often covered by most providers, is how male socialization significantly increases the likelihood of being abusive. There are various reasons for this, one of which is the discouragement of men to be emotionally expressive or aware. This limit on emotionality reduces men's ability to feel compassion, which increases the ability to be abusive and controlling.

-Alluding to another movie, as made clear in the Lord of the Rings movies, power can corrupt ("my precious"). The more power one has, relative to others, the easier it is to become corrupted by that power and to use it to overpower others. One such example is the power acquired by labor unions which, while initially leading to many gains for workers, at times has become corrupted and used that power inappropriately (e.g., the teamsters).

-All present agreed that there should be a second part to this discussion where there is a focus on systemic interventions to deal with the above. That topic will be scheduled for a future meeting.