

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes--7/6/2004

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TOPIC: Domestic Violence and the Extended Family

Generally when we think of domestic violence and who's being affected, we look at the partner and perhaps the children. What about other family members? Are they enabling the perpetrator? What is their relationship with him? How does this affect his progress? A perpetrator's environment has a huge effect on his progress in changing beliefs, attitudes and culture. The family culture is an important part of the whole. Extended families can include the perpetrator's family or the victim's family, or both. Many men come from divorced homes. Often there have been stepfathers who have committed violence against their mom.

General Issues

Societal training begins at an early age. Children observe how women are treated at home, in church, in businesses, schools, etc. Abuse can be at many levels and is not always physical. For instance, how do partners divide family responsibilities? Does he do his share? In family relations with household responsibilities, the issue is whether there is respect and mutual decision-making, and if there is coercion involved. This doesn't necessarily mean that each has to do half of everything.

Extended family can go beyond immediate personal family - it can also be thought of as family of friends as a child is growing up.

One participant talked about how a mother who reported her son to the police initially, and said she was afraid of him. This changed when he was in a program - she was enabling him later with the program. Fear of their sons is something a batterer's mother may experience. If there was violence in his family of origin, either he or another family member may have abused her - physically, verbally or otherwise.

In victim groups there tends to be more talk about the extended family, including abuse being done by teen-age children as well as their partner. Extended family may also informally include friends. For example, madrin@s & padrinos, comadres and comrades who may not be relatives, may be closer than relatives. The extended family involvement can be a positive or negative aspect.

Typically, family abuse issues come up in groups during holiday seasons, when families traditionally gather. Later stage men are more able to deal with potentially difficult family situations, and perhaps even to share their own experience. They are more

apt to understand the concept that people don't have to agree and they don't have to argue, and to be able to state their beliefs assertively rather than abusively.

A perpetrator is often volatile when he is around his father, or perhaps his brothers, if he has been raised in an abusive family. This is a risk factor to consider. The abuse in such a family has been normalized, so it is harder for the man to remain non-abusive. He may not recognize his own abusive behavior toward his mother.

Abusive men have not always witnessed extreme violence in their family of origin. And most men from abusive homes do NOT become abusers. Men who abuse may have at some point learned to control, and this may have been converted into abusive behaviors against their partners.

Cultural Issues

Keep in mind that extended family is especially relevant in communities of color which are often much more interactive with extended family than mainstream families.

The majority of men mainstream facilitators encounter are not in a tight extended family. This is not usually the case with Latino cultures. Latinos often have multiple families living in the same home, particularly with recent immigrants. This can be for economic reasons. Circumstances and attitudes may vary drastically, based on level of acculturation, level of English spoken, whether family is from a rural or urban background, etc.

In general, Latinos generally have a stronger sense of family loyalty and community than the mainstream population. For example, in this country, much emphasis is placed on "success" as defined by the individual's ability to earn money. In Latino sense, family is usually more important than the economy. Family members frequently loan or give money to each other when asked or when they see the need - even if they themselves may have need of the money.

Even in Latino culture, where the mother is generally considered a "saint" (vs. the partner who may be viewed as the opposite), we cannot assume that the man has not been abusive to his mother. It may not have been recognized as abuse, because of false family concepts of "normal."

In immigrant cultures, there can be conflicting values from society and the elders. The third generation may still have to translate for grandma or grandpa, but also may be very involved in American society - schools, business, etc. The elders may tell them what they are hearing in society is all wrong. Thus, the old beliefs are passed on.

Extended family involvement with mainstream perpetrators tends to exist especially with some of the youngest men (who may still be living with and/or dependent on parents and siblings) and some of the oldest men (who may be grandparents and involved with their grandchildren as well as their children).

Sometimes extended family members are not involved in a client's life. Sometimes a perpetrator will not have any of his extended family here. He may have considered his partner's family as a surrogate family. This can get complicated, especially where multiple cultures and languages come into play.

A religious community can in a way be perceived as an extended family. Difficulties of having the victim and perpetrator attending the same church were reported. A perpetrator can be expert at turning church members against the victim. Other times, a church may turn against the perpetrator, when they might provide helpful support of new beliefs, and condemnation of old beliefs and behaviors. At times, the church should take a position and deny the perpetrator access to attend the same church as his wife, but this is not always desirable. Too often, the pastor may not understand the dynamics of domestic violence.

One person discussed a Russian perpetrator whose extended family wanted to be intensely involved. This provider was uncomfortable with that. The client wanted help moving totally away from his family, because he felt he had been such an embarrassment to his family.

Another participant discussed a Latino client married to an Anglo. The client is living with her, but his family of origin doesn't want anything to do with her, and is really negative toward her. Her family of origin is appropriately supportive. The client's family, mainly his father and brothers, are against his wife and it's reported to be a major stressor in this client's life, additional to that of his victim.

Family dynamics with men who batter may fall into different categories.

Types of Family Categories:

- 1 Ignorance -don't know that much about Domestic Violence or may not even be aware it is going on in the family.** The perpetrator is extremely adept at looking good when he is with others. One person discussed how some extended family members may have been well-intentioned but ignorant. They may recognize that the perpetrator is abusing his victim. The family may initially try to be "supportive" of the victim. However, without knowledge of the dynamics of domestic violence, this "support" may translate into attempts to take over for her when what she needs is to figure out what she wants to do and then have family help her do it. They may be confused and frustrated, particularly when they are close to any children in the relationship. Inadvertently, these families may be re-victimizing her by giving the message that she is unable to take care of herself - which her partner has already told her is the case.
- 2. Collusion - buying into his lines. He convinces them he's a victim of her, society, etc.** Some clients' families may enable them not to take responsibility - parents may pay court, attorney or class fees. One example included where the family totally took over for him. Another facilitator discussed the family of origin's tendency to support the perpetrator. Some of the men won't have anything to do with the parents unless they want something. But the parents then get sucked in anyway. It is rare to find a family who holds the man responsible. More often, they enable the perpetrator, believing what he wants them to. Some parents pay all court costs, etc. of the perpetrator. They may do this because they feel they are fighting for the survival of the abuser, so continue to pour money into "saving" their child from the bad guys. They may view their adult "child" as a victim of the system. Another person said some parents act this way because they feel

guilty about something they may have done or not done in the past. In essence, they may feel their actions caused the problem. This may be, for example, if the parent had an alcohol or drug abuse issue in the past, and think this may have contributed to their son's violence. (Counselors can encourage them to attend Al-Anon.)

3. Perpetration - victimizing him and/or her. The family may have power-over values which they continue to use. When a perpetrator is trying to change these false beliefs, it is extremely difficult to be around people who continue to act out on these false beliefs. Other men are experiencing violence by their parents toward them, even while they may be focusing on trying to change their own violent attitudes and behavior. In some cases, it might be advisable for clients to minimize or avoid contact with his extended family.

4. Isolation-believing the information and issue should be kept within the family and that outsiders should not be involved. A family can experience shame when they feel that as a family, they are responsible for resolving the issues in the family, and if they don't, that is their failure. This dynamic may apply in religious communities, as well. Dealing with old-world beliefs, some faith leaders are reluctant to even report (mandatory reporter) crimes that they feel should be dealt with within the religious community. Too often they feel sex abuse or violence is something that should be dealt with strictly within the church/synagogue/mosque. One facilitator told how an Asian father discussing his son's domestic violence told the facilitator it was family business.

5. Withdrawal - where the family may be somewhat aware there are issues, but don't want anything to do with it. They may have at one time tried to become involved, but either got tired, frustrated or confused at some point and backed off. When the victim returns to the perpetrator after a family "rescue," she has her reasons. But the extended family may see this as incomprehensible and judge her. They may feel worried, hurt and perhaps rebuffed. They don't know how to respond, so may back off. "A woman leaves the home when she has support. But if she doesn't have support, she will return."

6. Accountability - holding perpetrators accountable. Some clients are "family mandated" to get help. This support can be very effective in helping a perpetrator change. When parents will hold their son accountable, that makes a huge difference in apparent change. When parents have "mandated" their adult children, this can be very powerful if the family is monitoring this. One person suggested we could provide family members with a list of how we know when a perpetrator is/isn't changing. Many such lists are available, and some have already found this helpful to distribute to victims. It could raise the family's awareness, so they know what to look for, rather than just having to depend on information he feeds them. If the extended family gives the victim support, the perpetrator sees this as challenging his authority. When they validate her feelings and desires, he views that as being against him.

There may be different combinations of these types. Family image or "family secrets" can affect how the family responds. Shame can be a huge issue. This shame may be more intensive in some cultures, but depending on the individual family culture, it can be huge in any culture.

What providers can do

Assessment

How can we find out the “family culture” affecting the client and his partner? At intake, we can ask who clients spend time with. We could also ask what are family reactions “to what’s going on.” We need to try to determine the effect of the family on the perpetrator’s behavior - ascertain what is the family stance on the domestic violence he had perpetrated.

Facilitators need to examine with each perpetrator, how important is extended family influence on this client and the victim(s)? What effect does the extended family have on the perpetrator’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors? However, when providing information, men may “protect” their family. They may not admit there was anything wrong with their family. Of course, they may not know what “normal” means. Also, there is a frequent attitude that the past is past, and is no longer relevant. “It’s over and done with.”

Intervention

Providers should talk to men in the group as to how to approach extended family members about the domestic violence issues. This is particularly the case when they are past the initial stages of denial, and are recognizing the effects of their violence. This can tie into discussions of amends.

A perpetrator needs to understand how he should present the situation to extended family. BIP curriculum needs to help him comprehend the damage he has done in blocking his wife’s participation in her - and his - extended family.

Men who buy into the BIP program have to figure out how to react to abusive situations when they have started change.. When they have to deal with abusive behaviors and attitudes in their extended families, this can be difficult. We need to talk with men about how they deal with this, and teach them how to share the information with their children.

It’s a balancing act for men who are changing to remain involved with an abusive family. They may fall into old patterns of trying to control others. They need to understand they can’t make anyone else change. Focusing on one’s own behavior is the first priority. For some individuals the best thing may be to avoid abusive family interactions. This is particularly the case with men who are in the early stages of a BIP. We don’t want a perpetrator to fall back into patterns of manipulation and control, even if they are speaking up against abuse!

Community Education and Outreach

One person does education pieces with the churches - whatever training they are invited to do. Often couples in a violent relationship come to the church for help, and the pastor may not have the expertise to recognize or deal with the violence. We can help by sharing information with religious communities wherever possible.

We can perhaps impact violence by doing interventions through the extended family. Older women have a lot of authority in many cultures. This information is coming out of some of the culturally-specific DV groups. Enlightened elders may offer an

effective voice against domestic violence. ARMS trains women's group leaders, as well as other church groups, which has provided additional opportunities to get the word out.

Community awareness of domestic violence is an essential component as part of a community response to reduce domestic violence, and alleviate secrecy and shame for the victim. This is appropriate and necessary in all cultures.