

1989

Counseling battered women

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Dorothy A., "Counseling battered women" (1989). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3430.
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Counseling battered women

Abstract

Violence against women by men is not a new problem. Certain cultures have encouraged it; others have regulated it. English common law, after which American laws are patterned, gave husbands the right to chastise their wives. The "rule of thumb" referred to the right of a husband to beat his wife with a stick "no thicker than his thumb" (Martin, 1983, p.46). Most states adopted this policy, acknowledging wife beating as acceptable, up to a point. This attitude was best summed up by an old North Carolina court ruling that stated, "unless some permanent injury be inflicted or there be an excess of violence ... the law will not invade the domestic forum and go behind the curtain". (Gellen, Hoffman, Jones & Stone, 1984, p. 601).

COUNSELING BATTERED
WOMEN

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Dorothy A. Turner

July, 1989

This Research Paper By: Dorothy A. Turner
Entitled: Counseling Battered Women

has been approved as meeting the research paper
requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Violence against women by men is not a new problem. Certain cultures have encouraged it; others have regulated it. English common law, after which American laws are patterned, gave husbands the right to chastise their wives. The "rule of thumb" referred to the right of a husband to beat his wife with a stick "no thicker than his thumb" (Martin, 1983, p.46). Most states adopted this policy, acknowledging wife beating as acceptable, up to a point. This attitude was best summed up by an old North Carolina court ruling that stated, "unless some permanent injury be inflicted or there be an excess of violence...the law will not invade the domestic forum and go behind the curtain". (Gellen, Hoffman, Jones & Stone, 1984, p. 601).

Battered women are often subject to two other forms of abuse - rape and verbal assault. When asked, many women recount that they were forced to have sex with their husbands after a beating. Forced intercourse need not mean a gun was held to their heads; the fear of another beating is an adequate threat. Battered women consistently complain of degrading verbal abuse. Verbal assaults, like physical ones, may go on for hours in a relentless attack on woman's sense of dignity and self worth and almost always include threats. In one study, all subjects thought they could be killed by their

husbands. The home is the most common place where homicide, recurring battering assaults, and sexual attacks occur (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). Assaults by spouses that occur in the home are likely to be more violent than assaults on women outside the home by persons other than spouses. Of all female homicides in California in 1971, one-third were committed by husbands in the home (Schulman, 1979).

The purpose of this paper is to present a review of current literature relating to the characteristics of battered women and effective remedial interventions and counseling strategies.

Characteristics of a Battered Woman

Current research indicates that there are certain characteristics common among women who are battered and remain in abusive relationships. Pagelow (1981) found that abused women, as a group, demonstrate low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and a tendency to withdraw from interpersonal contact. Bowen (1982) mentioned low self-esteem, dependency, learned helplessness, fear, and psychological neediness as characteristics of abused women. Other characteristics include acceptance of traditional cultural roles, submissiveness, and helplessness.

Battered women experience a devastatingly low

self-esteem (Mc G Mullen & Carroll, 1983). The humiliation and shame of being assaulted by someone with whom she is intimate produces low self-esteem regardless of high or low feeling of self-worth before entering the relationship. In addition, the self-image of the abused woman drops to the point where she believes she is responsible for and deserving of the abuse. The battered woman also feels a sense of isolation. The tendency of society to shun the victim reinforces this feeling. Low self-esteem, combined with a deep sense of shame causes the spouse to hide from family, friends, and neighbors. Shame, isolation and withdrawal originate from two chief sources, contempt for one's self because the woman allowed the abuse to occur, or because she feels that if her marriage fails, she has failed.

Another characteristic is fear. A battered woman has an ever-present fear of retaliation on the part of the man. Along with this is the fear which stems from constant terrorism and intimidation. Battering, whether or not it is premeditated, is purposeful behavior. The use of physical force against wives is an attempt on the part of the husband to bring about a desired outcome. The violence temporarily brings him what he wants - his wife gives in, placates him, or stops her

demands. As a form of intimidation, violence signifies that a mans' way will prevail even when the woman struggles against it. She is left in a constantly vigilant state; the violence has forced her to worry about the time, place, or reason for the next attack. As trust is destroyed, constant fear takes its place, especially in cases of repeated violence (Schechter, 1982).

Remedial Interventions and Counseling Strategies Crisis Intervention

By the time a battered woman seeks the aid of a counselor, the situation is usually desperate. The counselor can facilitate the initial meeting by reflecting that he or she understands the urgency of the situation by immediately seeing the woman and assuring her additional appointments if necessary. The core characteristics - acceptance, understanding, and genuineness - are crucial in counseling a battered wife. She must know that the counselor understands and accepts her present reality so that she can open up and share her feelings about that reality (Heppner, 1978). Because a battered wife usually feels very passive and out of control, it is important to reinforce her attempts at rational decision making and self-control. By doing this the counselor is strengthening the battered woman's control over

her own situation. Because the woman is usually in an intense state of confusion, it is also important that the counselor possess extensive skills in problem-solving and decision-making areas.

A counselor who is involved in crisis intervention with a battered woman has to be knowledgeable in many practical areas in order to safeguard her well-being at the time she makes a decision to leave. The battered woman may need help in finding a place to live temporarily, either with a friend or relative, in a temporary shelter or in a safe home. These places should be as far away from the batterer as possible and kept secret from him. A crisis counselor should always be aware of the need for the woman's safety. The primary consideration in crisis intervention is to remove the woman from the battering situation, if possible, and to secure her safety.

Other practical considerations a crisis counselor must consider are related to money, school for the children, interceding with the woman's employer if necessary, child-care, and helping the woman find professional help. A crisis counselor sometimes acts as an advocate for the woman, going with her to lawyers, public assistance, and other service providers, so that the woman does not have to be alone in those situations.

Individual Therapy

There are many helping strategies for counseling battered women. First among these and sometimes most controversial, is to encourage the woman to leave the battering relationship at least temporarily to seek help. The odds are against a woman who tries to go it alone. Studies show that battered women who leave the home and go to a shelter where there is help available have far greater success in overcoming the emotional and motivational deficits produced by learned helplessness (NiCarthy, 1986). Less success is reported in overcoming helplessness when women remain with their battering partners and try to change the relationship to a nonbattering one. Most often, it is only the woman who seeks help. The man truly believes she is the problem and she believes it too. When she seeks help, it is usually to find out what is wrong with her that has allowed this situation to come about.

Feminist-oriented counseling helps to counter the effects of stereotypical sex-roles. Pagelow (1981) attempted to measure to what extent traditional values regarding women and their position in marriage relationships or society kept them trapped in violent relationships. She noted that, after a woman left a violent relationship for a safe place, a gradual weakening

of the traditionalism to which she subscribed occurred. Counselors can augment this process by examining societal beliefs using values clarifications exercises and sex-role inventories that might serve as consciousness raising tools. A combination of behavioral and insight-oriented feminist therapy has been recommended as the most effective approach with battered women (Ennis, 1988). Counselors can help the battered woman separate her own personal and psychological issues that are getting in the way from those issues that are common to all women in society.

It is imperative to not blame the victim. In an effort to offer some concrete help the counselor may mistakenly focus on how the battered woman contributes to the batterer's explosions. This search for behaviors on her part that provoke assaults implicitly accepts the man's right to beat her if he doesn't approve of those behaviors. The typical battered woman accepts total responsibility for the success or failure of the relationship. So, at best, the woman is being set up for feelings of failure when the next attack comes. Through counseling, the woman needs to learn that battery is a learned response and must be stopped before any difficulties in the relationship can be dealt with. The counselor should choose an action-

oriented therapy. The goal is her attaining independence within or outside the relationship (Carlson, 1987).

The counselor should resist the temptation to treat the relationship. Walker (1978) stated that "psychotherapists, including social workers and psychologists, have been inadequate in helping battered women", (p.121). She attributes this to two causes: 1) psychotherapy has generally emphasized keeping families intact whenever possible, and 2) women who have been abused generally have enough symptoms to keep a therapist busy. Their coping techniques which were learned to protect themselves from harm are often viewed as evidence of severe personality disorders rather than behavioral disturbances because of battering.

A counselor working with battered women needs to be direct in the early stages of counseling because the battered woman has no feeling of having control over her life. Most have poor motivation and problem-solving skills. Care must be taken, however, that the direct approach to be used for as short a time as possible because the woman could shift her dependence from her male companion to the counselor and treat her counselor as her "rescuer". Also, assertiveness training is

recommended as good counseling technique in counseling battered women. Women who have difficulty expressing and even acknowledging their anger may be depressed and passive because they have turned their anger inward. Anger, redirected by learning communication skills will help the battered woman to attain self-confidence and realize that she does have options. Ball and Wyman (1978), however, provide a word of caution to counselors using assertiveness training with battered women. Their report shows that while battery often stops when the woman demonstrates she will no longer accept it, in some instances the hostility of the batterer increases, thus posing a serious threat to the woman. Careful assessment of this possibility and preparation for its occurrence must be made with the battered woman.

Group Therapy

Support groups have proven to be very effective in overcoming the effects of battering and learned helplessness. In a group there is a sharing of common problems and approaches. As one woman identifies with other women and sees their successes, she comes to believe in her own power. The ability to examine her beliefs from an internal, personal perspective apart from an external, environ-

mental perspective gives her a greater sense of personal power. A common theme, as a major cause of family violence of all types, is the abuse of power in the family. The stronger member seeks control and refuses to negotiate, as it is easier to dominate (Douglas, 1985). In addition to gaining personal power, the woman must learn to be self-nurturing, self-loving, and capable of pleasing herself in meeting her own needs, such as making choices in her daily life and gaining control over time and money. Particularly useful skills to be presented in group settings are: anger management, conflict resolution, stress reduction techniques, self-esteem practices, and values clarification exercises (Berlin, 1981).

The impetus for mutual help for battered women springs directly from feminist ideas: women are the best experts on their own lives; women are often safer in relying on others who are like themselves than in placing their fate in the hands of authority figures; in speaking honestly to each other; women teach each other that their problems aren't merely individual, but are social, political, and shared by many others; institutionalized sex-roles are damaging to women, and the first step in changing them is to understand them; individual women have power and collectively

their power can be great; the best place for women to look for emotional support and practical help is often from other women (NiCarthy, Coffman & Merriam, 1984).

Summary

If you were battered before the mid-1970s, you probably didn't know of any shelters that would provide you refuge. If you had a vague feeling the police wouldn't help or prosecutors wouldn't take the law seriously, you were most likely right. State laws against woman battering had been on the books for many years, but provided little or no protection because they were usually ignored by police and prosecutors. If you went to the hospital after being battered you were probably asked few questions about your injuries, and if you lied about how you got them, medical personnel were relieved to let you off the hook by pretending to believe you. There was good reason to fear that if you told anyone you were being beaten, they either wouldn't believe or would blame you for it. If you saw a therapist or confided in your minister, chances are you were told to stop provoking your man and advised to tough it out. By the late 1970s however, things began to change, although many women who needed refuge and other help didn't yet realize it was becoming available. Nearly all states provided shelters,

though it was not always easy to find them, and in some areas you might have to travel several hundred miles to take advantage of them.

In the early to mid 1980s shelters and safe homes proliferated. Many states passed laws recognizing that it's a crime for a man to batter his wife, and more recently, new laws in some states make arrest mandatory where there is reasonable cause to suspect battering. Hospitals have special protocols for treating patients when battering is suspected. Ministers and therapists have been educated to understand that a woman who has been battered does not like it and has many reasons to fear leaving her partner.

In counseling battered women, the therapist now strives to counter the environment in which the client has been living. Concern for safety is of primary importance. The ultimate goal is to stop the battering. Believing her has a validating effect that is crucial. A woman counselor is more likely than a man to understand and empathize with a battered woman's feeling and her needs to protect herself. She may also be more likely to be knowledgeable about supportive women's groups in the community. In addition, she can be a good role model for a battered woman. Not all counselors believe it's the batterer who must change, his victim

is not to blame, and her obligation to keep herself safe is more important than an obligation to continue the relationship.

Women who have been abused often express feelings of guilt or shame because they continue to love the men who abuse them. They blame themselves, or they may have been blamed by friends, family members, or counselors. They often fear they will be criticized by anyone they tell about their lives. The weight of apprehension is removed when they begin talking with other women who have had similar experiences. Groups help women face the reality of what has happened to them, what might happen, and what their responsibilities are to themselves, their children, and their partners. They present an opportunity to explore options previously denied them. Groups provide a format for making decisions, and other participants' support helps to encourage the woman to follow through on those decisions. Groups provide also an atmosphere of acceptance, of community, and even of laughter and fun that has probably been missing in the lives of battered women for a long time.

Much has happened and there have been many improvements in our attitudes and knowledge regarding battered women. We are better able to help and understand these

women and their situations today than we were just a short decade or two ago. However, this is not to say that the problem is solved. Men continue to batter and women continue to fall in love with them in spite of the danger. Even with the sweeping reforms that have occurred, a battered woman may still encounter a police officer, judge, therapist or minister whose attitudes about battering have not caught up to the 1980s. The important thing is that there are now many support services and professionals available to provide a battered woman with the positive assistance that she needs.

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