



Measuring Success: Evaluating Batterers Intervention Programs

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When we heard, over a year ago now, that MSV had been chosen as one of four programs in the country to enter into a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct a "Violence Against Women Multifaceted Community-Based Demonstration Project," we were thrilled and excited. We knew this meant that we would be able to expand our program into another community. It would also allow us to evaluate, for the first time, how the introduction of a batterer's intervention program affects an entire system of interventions to interrupt violence against women.

During the beginning stages of the project we often found ourselves in a position of interpreting the meaning of "evaluation." In particular, we often were asked why we were not evaluating the outcome by measuring the degree of change in the individual men who went through the classes for batterers. Why had we proposed that assessing the consequences imposed on men who batter by the various parts of the criminal justice system has more significance for assuring the safety of women in the community than trying to measure the effects of our 24-week program on a particular man? Among many other things to say, it required a review of the history of the battered women's movement.

When the battered women's movement began over twenty years ago, the problem of woman battering had not yet been named. Gloria Steinem had said, "The word for battering was 'life', as in 'Thats life'". To the extent that the problem was remarked upon at all, it was in the context of a problem between two particular people and the discrete interactions between them. The violence was seen as a symptom of a disturbed, individual relationship.

As the women's movement (the "second wave" of feminism, an outgrowth of the post-WWII social justice movements) developed, specific issues pertaining to the oppression of women were identified. The articulation of gender as a basis for social oppression came from many different voices representing all aspects of women's lives. A factor which frequently frustrated women's efforts was the analysis of all women's reality on the basis of the experience of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. For women of color, this movement meant analyzing emerging theories about gender oppression within the context of race and sometimes class oppression. What is true for all oppressions, however, is that the enforcer and maintainer of subordination is violence.

Resistance to violence against women was first organized around public violence, specifically rape. In speak-outs and "take back the night" marches, women redefined rape from the woman's fault and something men couldn't help to a strategy for restricting women's freedom of movement. The women's movement claimed rape as a central issue of women's liberation, away from the purely academic realm of abnormal psychology and criminology.

Rather quickly, women who were analyzing rape as an expression of power (rather than as a condition of sexual aberrance) began to talk about how violence was being used not only in the public arena -- rape on the streets -- to restrict women's freedom, but in the private arena, with physical abuse in marriage. Women began to speak out about the beatings they were enduring and the bind they were in because the criminal justice system, and in fact virtually every social institution, did not recognize battering as an experience materially affecting women's lives. Over and over, women talked about being forced to stay in abusive relationships because they had nowhere to go.

As a response to this crisis, "safe homes," "shelters" or "crisis centers" were set up as places where a woman could go into hiding with her children. These shelters did more than provide physical safety; they

represented enclaves within what was increasingly understood by many women to be a society often indifferent and even hostile to the safety of women and children.

The shelter movement swept the country. Women took each other into their own homes, helping them get warrants, divorces, jobs and child care. Support groups in the shelters helped women speak their own experience in a new language -- one which brought her experience into bold relief. It was a movement that challenged social norms which blamed her for his violence and did nothing to stop him, joining him, instead, in labeling her behavior as justification for his violence.

As with all social change, this change was fundamentally disturbing. To imagine marriage and the family -- the central social institution, the main site of love and care, the root of the natural order -- as being oppressive or dangerous to women was outrageous. The women who promoted this way of thinking were labeled as threats to what was good and right.

A formerly battered woman said, "this is the first revolution where those in struggle are fighting it in their homes and going out for safety and support. In every other social revolution, those fighting for change take the fight out into the world, and go home for rest and respite from the struggle." A frightening prospect for all women, it meant an even more poignant dilemma for women engaged in other struggles against oppression, such as women of color having to resist racism along with their husbands, fathers and brothers.

As public awareness grew of "wife-battering" (as it was known), reflexively the question followed: "But what about the men?" Women struggling with few resources to offer the most meager of services to women and children fleeing for their lives were understandably impatient with that question. Whether it was to vilify or to justify, the need to bring men into the center of the picture was overwhelming. The women's question -- Why is it that we can't focus on women for any time at all before there is a compulsion to talk about and concentrate on men? -- went unheard for the most part. What was clear was how unnatural it was to focus on women -- on their needs, their experience, their feelings -- independently from men.

Women working in the battered women's movement could see the problem: if the focus were shifted to the men, whether in condemnation or in sympathy, then once again resources would quickly shift to services for them. What was clear was the centrality of men in society and conversely, how uncomfortable people were with attempts to address women's experience and needs as central.

Programs began for working with men who batter. Women working in the shelters watched with uneasiness and ambivalence. While it was agreed that men for the most part wouldn't change their abusive behavior without some kind of outside intervention, most women in the movement believed that direct negative consequences were the interventions that would send a message that society no longer accepts his abuse.

It was clear that the change which had to occur was in the social norms that had heretofore given men tacit permission to dominate and control their wives through ignoring his battering, imposing no consequences, and blaming her by asking what she had done to provoke it. What was in contention was the way that change would be accomplished.

The logic of providing groups where men who battered could be "treated" to deal with whatever it was that was "causing" them to batter appeared indisputable. "Anger control" and "anger management" programs sprang up. Mental health service providers seemed the logical "experts" on the problem. Soon there were academic articles debating "treatment modalities" for batterers. The original definition of the problem was being obscured and buried. Battered women's activists and pro-feminist men felt themselves losing their voice against the dominant culture's desire to define battering as a problem of individual psycho-pathology rather than a man's carrying out, not deviating from, the social norms.

Once again, it was far less of a threat to the status quo to deal with a social problem by defining the deviant group, isolating them, labeling them as "the problem," and then treating them. Then energy, resources and attention could be directed toward studying them, debating rates of success and the relative merits of different treatment modalities. In this way the rest of us could feel satisfied that we had done something substantive to deal with the problem. Yet in so doing, we were not required to look at the larger social issue. We were not required to examine either the society in which each of us has found a comfortable niche, or the ways in which our own comfort depends on various forms of social inequality.

For the programs working with batterers from a pro-feminist perspective, this presented a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they were committed to a social justice solution to violence against women. They were committed to changing the social structures and social norms that condoned and in fact institutionalized the ongoing inequality of women, people of color, gays and lesbians. They understood that all of these systems of inequality support and depend upon each other, that together they reinforce a world view that inequality of power and the abuse of that power are natural, albeit sometimes unfortunate.

On the other hand, because these programs offered groups/classes for batterers, they had a hard time representing the position that these programs were a means to the end, not the end in itself; and that to imagine that "treating" the tiny minority of batterers that got "caught," usually men already marginalized by race or class, and measuring their progress as an indication of success in ending violence against women, was foolish at best. At worst it was a genuine betrayal of the women being abused and the women who had struggled so hard to force the problem into public view. Therefore, the challenge of these programs was to use their platform to reframe the problem as being one that involved all of us, not simply a particular segment of men.

The design of our evaluation project is an effort to shift the discourse away from the question, "What is your success rate with individual batterers?" to, instead, "How are diverse communities moving toward establishing and enforcing norms that say battering will not be tolerated here?"

While we are not focusing the evaluation on the men who go through the program, of course it is important to be able to document the process of instituting the program in as much detail as possible. Therefore, a process evaluation will document the activities of the staff as they maintain the crucial connection between men in the program and other community systems. For example, it will be important to know exactly what transpires when a man violates his contract with Men Stopping Violence and is then faced with the consequences for that: what is the role and what are the particular actions of the man's instructor so that the appropriate consequence is imposed?

This study is for us a beginning point. It will, no doubt, raise as many questions as it answers. But it reflects our commitment to the search for the right questions.