



Individual therapy for batterers?

by Gus B. Kaufman, Jr., Ph.D.

Many people, especially therapists, have let us know over the years that MSV's policy of expecting men to forego individual therapy while in the six-month primary class seems puzzling, non-therapeutic, even punitive. They may have come to understand that couples therapy (and mediation) are not safe interventions after a man has abused a woman,* but they don't see why he shouldn't be allowed to do individual work while he is in our class.

Here are some of the reasons for this policy:

1) Our primary goal--safety for victims. The main task of the class is to challenge men to take responsibility for their abusive actions and choose alternatives. One-to-one therapy is not traditionally focused on that task. Most abusive men will benefit from individual therapy, but not until they have completed meaningful work to stop their emotional and physical assaults.

In individual therapy, a client may well focus on his history of being victimized. To do that without having been steeped in how not to victimize others, creates at best confusion and at worst a man who is likely to do what he has done in the past when he was upset -- blame and attack his partner. In an interview with a batterer, David Adams quotes a counselor asking the man, "Are you waiting to stop feeling insecure before you stop being violent?" (*in Bograd & Yllo, 1988*). Dealing with the traumatic effects of having been abused and victimized is important work, but it is not likely to have the immediate effect of stopping a man from acting in controlling and abusive ways. MSV strives to keep the reality and experience of others, not just the batterer, always in the forefront.

2) Ending privatization -- Individual therapy is a private matter. Indeed, one of the strongest ethics associated with it, by custom and law, is that what is said in therapy will be kept private and confidential. Men come to MSV who have been exerting power and control (up to and including violence) over a partner to maintain their version of how the family should be. Men want individual therapy because they **do not** want what they have done treated as a public matter. They correctly see that they will lose a great deal of control and be exposed to negative consequences if they cannot keep what they have done and are doing private. To honor this wish would be to reinforce an unacceptable notion of women and children as property.

It is precisely the aim of the batterer's intervention program, to say that battering of a partner **is** a crime, that it **is not** simply a private matter. That is why the contract a man signs to enter the course states that we will not maintain confidentiality to protect him from the consequences of his abuse. For battering to end, we must cease to collude in treating crimes committed in the family as though they were not really crimes.

3) Breaking his isolation --Men who abuse and control partners typically have no men with whom they are open and honest about their lives (including their abuse), and on whom they depend for emotional support. Instead they tend to expect their partner to somehow meet all of their emotional needs and therefore tend to be quite jealous of her contacts with others. To change this pattern of isolating self and partner and begin to open up and be vulnerable with other men is difficult. If a man has an individual therapist, he is likely to avoid taking on this work. Men in classes are required to call each other regularly, go over safety plans and other homework together, and call others in "red flag situations" whatever the time of day or night. His classmates are men in his life who are expected to consider partners' well-being (and any children's) as important as his.

Other considerations:

Psychiatric problems

Men who are clinically depressed, manic-depressive, suicidal, etc. may require medication and medical management to be able to function while in the primary class. Meetings for this purpose with a psychiatrist are not likely to increase the danger to the spouse.

On shame and guilt

Some therapists have expressed concerns that focusing on his wrongdoing shames a man. Ulester Douglas, M.S.W., of the MSV staff has reminded me of the difference between what John Bradshaw and others (including Dr. Jim Fowler, an ethicist at Emory University) call "toxic shame" and guilt vs. healthy shame and guilt. We think it is important for perpetrators to feel shame and guilt about their violent behavior and to have this motivate them toward taking responsibility for their actions and making commitments to change. We see it as a problem if someone **does not** feel these effects when they have violated another.

In our initial one-to-one interview with a man considering entering the program, we ask him to give an account of his worst incident of abuse to his partner and a detailed list of the other abusive behaviors he has used. We point out that we are asking not to embarrass, humiliate or shame him, though he may feel those things, but because 'you can't change what you can't claim.' I sometimes tell a man it's like having a cat with a dirty litter box. In the act of trying to bury something, something else gets dug up and spread around and the whole thing stinks. The only solution is to clean the box!

Men's Self-interest

Men, especially white men, reflexively assume MSV is there for them alone and can be outraged when we act in ways they perceive as not in their interest (for example, denying them the "right" to go to individual therapy in the primary phase, requiring them to move out and write a signed confession if they physically assault their partners again, etc.). To this challenge we counterpose a question asked by MSV's founding Executive Director Kathleen Carlin: Where does men's self-interest lie? Is it in more and more domination and control, or in working for justice?

Good guys

Sometimes we hear, or say to ourselves, "Well isn't it possible that a 'motivated' man is capable of doing the work required in the class and still benefitting from individual work? Especially if the therapist collaborates with MSV's instructors?" This is a tough one--he, she, and sometimes we want to believe he's a good guy, he's changed, it won't happen again. But we have found over the years that treating a man as an exception to the rule is a fast path to his abusing again. Rich Vodde, formerly of our staff, said "The first principle of male privilege is 'the rules apply to others, not to me.'"

What next?

After a man has completed six months (in the Atlanta program) or nine months (in our Douglas and Paulding County program) of primary class, men who have maintained non-violence and who have shown themselves capable may wish to join in the work of making a safe and just society. They do this through the MSV program's Community Restitution Program, helping to intervene with other men and continuing to work to maintain non-abusiveness and to make restitution to those they have harmed. Men in Third Phase continue having close contacts with one another. They are encouraged to seek out individual (and sometimes couples) therapy and most do.

Conclusion

None of these policies and procedures were easy for MSV to develop. They all challenge male privilege. I was already a psychologist when I began this work. It seemed natural to see men individually in my office for a number of sessions, to use third party (insurance company) payments when a man had such coverage, to provide a diagnosis for the insurance company, etc. Yet I remember an executive of a large corporation who saw me quite a few times individually. He declined to enter the "group" (as it was called then), because he said he was too uncomfortable in situations where he was not in control. It was (and is) not uncommon for men, especially those with more money and power, to wish to be seen individually. I am not sure how long it would have taken me to change if Kathleen Carlin, our founding Executive Director, had not insisted. She saw, as I came to see, that we could not get where we were going using the road we were traveling. As Audre Lorde said, "We will not be able to dismantle the master's house using the master's tools."

Gus B. Kaufman, Jr., Ph.D., co-founded Men Stopping Violence and was an instructor/trainer with MSV for 17 years.

Reference

"Counseling Men Who Batter: A Profeminist Analysis of Five Treatment Models," David Adams, in M. Bograd and K. Yllo, Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988.