

**Building Bridges to Women's Experience:
Philosophy and Practice of the Duluth Approach**

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*As participants in the movement to empower battered women and their children, and a movement for social justice, we must hold ourselves accountable **not** to those who are privileged in the existing structures, but to those who will be liberated as we struggle together.¹*

A commitment to place women's lives at the center of both theory and practice remains a basic tenet of the battered women's movement. Today, as accountability to women is replaced by accountability to the priorities of funders, participation of women who have experienced battering is no longer recognized or valued as a programmatic goal. When the community response to domestic violence does not correspond to the reality or diversity of women's experiences, safety is jeopardized and the power of the batterer is reinforced.

Activists' vision of change comes out of the lives of women; if the maintenance of services becomes so all-consuming that battered women's participation and involvement are forgotten issues, then the movement will cease to grow and shelters will lose their vitality.²

Full participation of survivors benefits other women, increases program effectiveness, and supports a critical vision as a social movement.

In the writings of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) of Duluth, Minnesota,^a are at least two reasons to value the participation of women who have been battered. First, a full understanding of battering is critical to the ability to build an effective response to both victim and perpetrator.

The experience of the DAIP and seemingly many other communities has been that victim-blaming practices and collusion with batterers are less likely to occur when battered women and shelter advocates are actively involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of each aspect of the intervention process.³

Second, to successfully meet the goal of protecting women requires input from those living the experience. For Duluth, "if you want to know about battering and what it is all about the best source of information is battered women."⁴ The DAIP incorporates a process that successfully bridges social change work with strategies to address the safety needs of women in crisis. In part, this process depends on program philosophies and practices that re-vision accountability to women who have been battered.

Philosophy: Questions of Victim or Agency

Women who have been battered speak of oppression, domination, power-over, and exploitation manifested in multiple ways. They also speak of resistance, struggle, process, personal strength, and power. Martha Mahoney addresses this apparent contradiction through a discussion of victim and agency (which she defines as "the functioning of a wholly mobile, autonomous, individual, free actor").⁵

For Mahoney, women who live in battering relationships simultaneously resist and experience harm. She argues that "a woman's belief in herself as an actor in her life can prevent

her from identifying her experience as similar to that of other women who experience oppression.”⁶ Mahoney explains that embracing battering as a criminal justice issue places definitions of domestic violence in the hands of the traditions and structures of that profession, a profession that holds a particular world view. Physical violence is then taken out of context and isolated from the cultural, institutional, and social patterns that are at play in each woman’s life. Yet, these are the very patterns that form the context of her battering relationship and are at the heart of her victimization and of her resistance.

Without solid grounding in the realities of women’s experience, “social stereotypes and cultural expectations about the behavior of battered women ... hide women’s acts of resistance and struggle. Both law and popular culture tend to equate agency in battered women with separation from the relationship.”⁷ To limit evidence of women’s resistance to leaving the relationship fails to capture the many ways that women act within that relationship. Once we understand that women can simultaneously carry oppression and resistance (and characteristics of victim and actor), her experience can be understood as a “matrix of choices and decisions.”⁸ Strategies can then be designed that support her as a victim *and* validate her as a capable individual making choices about her life.

Philosophy: Consciousness Raising and Empowerment

In the movement for women’s liberation, consciousness raising has a long history as a method of articulating women’s experience and directing social action. Consciousness raising is a process of examining one’s life in relationship to the societal conditions that create the context for one’s experiences. Historically, consciousness raising was a method used by feminist communities within the battered women’s movement. More recently, empowerment is the primary approach for working with women who have been battered. Empowerment is a term that is now widely used and detached from its political consciousness, but for feminist activists it refers to a process of finding one’s personal power (a positive power) to advocate on one’s own behalf.⁹

In the facilitator’s manual *In Our Best Interests* written by Ellen Pence, is a paper by Bonnie Mann that offers a persuasive critique of therapeutic approaches to working with women who have been battered. She contends that therapy-oriented approaches, including empowerment, are problematic in three ways: they focus on the psychological self, feelings, and safety; remove women’s experience from its cultural context; redefine her through victimization and healing. Empowerment creates a false dichotomy between feelings and politics, shifting the emphasis from structural or systemic analyses of women’s oppression to a focus on personal feelings. Mann contends that empowerment removes women from a political struggle and encourages personal transformation rather than transforming the conditions of oppression. As women’s experience is depoliticized,

[they] develop an intense self-absorption that goes beyond reflecting on their lives or experiences, they become acutely conscious of themselves as victims and begin to see this as their full identity, and they are obsessively concerned with feelings, with ‘coping’ and ‘dealing’ with the world rather than transforming it.¹⁰

Mann argues that the search for empowerment holds women in a place of victim. From this perspective, Pence concludes that therapeutic groups

focus on helping participants become more like women who are not beaten, divorced, or exploited. While the roles of sexism, economic exploitation and

violence in women's condition are superficially acknowledged, the underlying message is that something about the participants causes their mistreatment. ... Women are invited to engage in labeling themselves.¹¹

The process of returning to and prioritizing women's experience, then exploring the commonalities of those experiences, was the root of consciousness raising groups of second wave feminisms. The identification of violence as common to the lives of women, and the development of political responses to remediate that violence, were outcomes of such groups. The voices of women who had lived with battering were understood as necessary to defining, conceptualizing, and building responsive intervention and prevention strategies. This concept of woman as fully engaged participant is contradictory to the current presentation of woman as victim.

Philosophy: Radical Education

The DAIP approach moves away from therapeutic or empowerment models to an educational approach focused on liberation. For the DAIP, the role of education or consciousness raising in the women's movement, and particularly in the battered women's movement, is crucial to the movement's success in ending violence, not just in the lives of those who come to our shelter doors or advocacy programs, but in the lives of all women.¹²

Pence notes that "education that is offered to oppressed people in our society is never neutral. Education either challenges the status quo, or it serves to maintain the status quo."¹³ The Duluth philosophy of education is clear throughout their curricula.

- ✓ Learning directly related to life experience leads to a process of discovery that facilitates personal and social change.
- ✓ "Human beings are products of their world but are also able to act to change their world."¹⁴
- ✓ "Education [is] an instrument within a process of liberation."¹⁵
- ✓ "There is no greater challenge for any social movement than to live the vision of the change it seeks. A women's group does not merely prepare women for a future experience of empowerment or liberation. The group is itself an act of empowerment or liberation."¹⁶

Linking liberation to the struggle against oppression, liberatory education is a process that examines oppression beginning with the everyday life of the individual. To start with an individual's experience of the world clarifies the struggle and encourages participants to engage in and accept responsibility for their own liberation. For the DAIP, the conditions of oppression become barriers to liberation that individuals are able to transform as they bridge their own experience to a global analysis. This education process, as a prescription for transformative social change, offers a philosophy for acting in the world.

In Practice: Women's Liberation Groups^b

The problem-posing education called for by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* re-frames the content, process, and relationships of education. The DAIP approach to women's groups as sites of struggle for liberation and freedom is based on the application of Freire's work in their practice.

Women's groups are designed to create a place where batterers and their co-conspirators in the system cannot control the discussion; they cannot interpret the facts; they cannot silence women's minds nor keep women from speaking. The purpose of the group is for women to rename their experiences.¹⁷

Liberatory education asks the teacher to also be the student and becomes a process of transformation for both student and teacher. The DAIP curricula promote critical thinking through a process of stepping back, demystification, dialogue, and action. This process of discovery and transformation is a means that is also the end. It is an approach intended to engage group participants in exploring (and then challenging) the conditions of oppression.

The DAIP curricula present a variety of teaching tools (*e.g.*, vignettes, stories, or role plays) designed to offer participants a way to *step back*, to view their experience in the stories of others. Showing scenarios familiar to participants accomplishes two goals: Participants see their experiences in relation to others and can reflect on their own behaviors as they examine the behavior of others. *Demystification* helps participants understand that throughout history the oppression of groups has been deemed the way of nature, God, or common sense. Science, religion, social institutions and cultural norms have all been used to reinforce mystical thinking. Education can serve either to perpetuate or to challenge this thinking. Critical thinking challenges belief systems and norms by questioning all of our assumptions.¹⁸

Challenging mystical thinking reframes accepted belief systems and norms as human constructs. "*Critical thinking* involves standing back from our daily existence, examining our lives, and seeing clearly what is happening in them. The ability to think critically expands our choices."¹⁹ This process helps participants understand how institutional and cultural contexts frame their own experience with battering.

The content of *dialogue* is the problems posed by the particulars of people's lives: "No matter how many women come to the doors of our programs, we cannot assume that we know what they want from groups unless we ask and listen to their responses."²⁰ Generating dialogue in women's liberation groups begins with listening to what women are discussing and selecting themes that flow directly from issues important to women who participate in the group. Themes are selected that "pose a problem, the analysis of which will help the group make connections between seemingly isolated concerns."²¹ Generative themes presented in the women's curriculum include battering, sexism, oppression, freedom, survival, anger, and power.

The facilitator is looking for themes that will generate discussion on personal, institutional, and cultural levels of awareness. These three levels of analysis relate themes to the physical and emotional needs of individuals, policy strategies of community institutions, and the cultural values of larger groups of people. For instance, a primary code in the women's group curriculum is a chart titled *Institutional and Cultural Supports for Battering*.²² This chart lists the tactics from the Power and Control Wheel down the side with institutional decisions and cultural beliefs written across the top.^c This tool guides dialogue for each theme generated by the group as they connect the individual experience to ways that institutions and the culture support violence against women. Consistent and repeated use of this format throughout the curriculum establishes a framework that participants can use in the future to think critically about their experiences in relation to the world.

The final step of this educational approach is to design and implement actions: "Without such opportunities, the education process is incomplete."²³ Participants reflect on the themes,

then design, conduct, and evaluate actions that address the conditions underlying their oppression on personal, institutional, and cultural levels. Facilitators and programs supporting this educational approach must provide opportunities for this level of involvement and participation.

A woman's group is more than a place to transfer information from one person to another. It is a place for coming to knowledge, comprehension and understanding. As we experience the process of critical thinking, stepping back and looking at the forces operating in our lives, purging [our]selves of mystical thinking, challenging our assumptions and seeking truth together despite pain and fear, the act of liberation occurs. Liberation is not something that will happen to us as women at some point in the future when there is a transfer of power from one group to another. Liberation is something we can experience now as we act and think in our best interests.²⁴

Through action comes an awareness of how participants are actors able to transform obstacles to their freedom.

In Practice: Opportunities for Women's Action

The call within the battered women's movement for participation and leadership from survivors recognizes the power of giving voice to women's experience and challenges common presentations of woman as victim. The Battered/Formerly Battered Women's Task Force of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence says that "we must act on our belief that even the most oppressed people are capable of working together to create positive change."²⁵ They recommend that activists engage in dialogue with women who have been battered to understand

- the nature of our oppression, and the ways we oppress others
- tactics which have proven useful to us
- what freedom and peace look like to us
- our priorities [and]
- organizational structures that empower us.²⁶

This analysis from within the movement recommends accountability to battered women

- by looking to battered women for leadership, and by creating opportunities and encouragement for leadership by battered women
- by involving battered women in the planning and design of programs or strategies
- by facilitating the participation of **all** non-abusive women in **every** aspect of our work and action
- by not abusing power in any relationship or setting
- by seeking and hearing the evaluation of battered women.²⁷

The commitment in Duluth to include women has not been without a struggle. The effort to move from pseudo-participation to participation that involves women in authentic ways led them to understand that

the growing trend in the movement to negotiate for change on behalf of women, rather than to organize women to affect change on their own behalf, is nowhere better modeled than in the design and implementation of the DAIP. This trend, if unaltered, is likely to lead to a continued distancing of programs from a feminist analysis, and will cause stagnation in our collective creative ability to change and transform this society.²⁸

Within the domestic violence community, "what is missing ... is the authentic participation of battered women in figuring out 'a way of doing things' that stops the violence."²⁹ There are four

primary ways the DAIP integrates the experience of women into the structure and process of their work: policy development/administration, training, research/evaluation, and opportunities for action.

Policy development/administration.

Recognizing that a program focusing on intervention with batterers can have problems being accountable, organizers of the DAIP ensured that the planning and implementation of its program would be heavily influenced by shelter advocates, shelter residents, women in shelter educational groups, and formerly battered women working on confronting violence against women.³⁰

An important lesson for the DAIP came from a 1984 survey of formerly battered women. To implement survey recommendations, women's group participants and survey respondents met directly with agency personnel. "Police administrators and chief prosecutors were, for the first time, put in the position of being directly accountable to battered women instead of to only a small group of people negotiating on their behalf."³¹ This experience led staff in Duluth to understand that the direct involvement of survivors in giving voice to their own recommendations added texture and depth to agency responses. The recommendations developed by this group of women who had experience with the system was more comprehensive than an agenda developed by program staff without the input of those women.

The DAIP continues to receive guidance and consultation from a Battered Women's Advisory Committee. This committee of seven to twelve volunteers represents a cross section of women, each of whom has had interaction with the domestic violence service community within a four year period. The committee meets six to seven times a year to discuss the potential impact of proposed policy changes on women served by local agencies.

Training.

The voice and experience of women who have been battered permeate the training materials of the DAIP. The creation of each training manual produced by the DAIP involved intensive collaboration with survivors: The content and quality of the men's educational curricula are attributed to their participation. For example, in the 1990 men's educational curriculum we find this acknowledgement:

Five women agreed to spend two days together talking about the painful Experience of being battered. The edited version of hours of filming, ... is perhaps the most crucial teaching tool for those of us who will use the curriculum.³²

The training manuals include frequent transcriptions and quotes from women who assisted in the curriculum design. The creation of the 1990 manual also involved dozens of battered women who came to educational groups organized by the Duluth shelter, viewed our films, critiqued our definitions, added topics, deleted topics, and provided us with the understanding needed to make the training tapes... we do recognize their valuable contribution to this work.³³

The training video, *A Woman's Perspective*, is a series of short segments from a four-hour discussion of six women who had lived with battering. The lesson plan for each tactic of the men's educational curriculum is accompanied by selected segments of this discussion. Facilitators are encouraged to review the video prior to group exercises to refocus on the experience and stories of women. For male facilitators of men's educational groups, "working to

stop violence against women provides a unique opportunity to learn from women and understand sexism. It is extremely important that men working within this movement get leadership from women involved in the issue.”³⁴

Research/evaluation.

Created as a model project, ongoing evaluation was built into the DAIP structure from the beginning. As a result, the level of research and evaluation activities is unique in a social movement organization. Ongoing research and evaluation are used to identify gaps in agency responses, direct resolution of problems, and to “question our philosophical framework for understanding this complex issue.”³⁵ All phases of research activities are conducted by working closely with the local shelter.

Women who have had interactions with the agencies coordinating with the DAIP have participated in research and evaluation in a variety of ways.

- Three to four times a year women attending groups are asked for input about the effectiveness of the community coordinated response.³⁶
- Evaluation includes interviews with women whose partners are involved in the system.³⁷
- To supplement police records, the court monitor interviewed ten women who had been arrested to determine the need for revision of law enforcement policies.³⁸
- In 1985 seventy-seven women whose partners were involved in the batterers educational group evaluated three phases of the program. Thirty-nine women participated in a one-year follow-up evaluation.³⁹
- In 1984, a participatory action research project involved eleven formerly battered women. These women worked with a researcher to design a victim survey on needed changes in the policies of the agencies collaborating with the DAIP.⁴⁰ Those surveyed joined women attending educational groups in a forum designed to develop and implement recommendations from the survey.
- Women consulted with a researcher on the development of the *Abusive Behavior Inventory*.⁴¹

For the DAIP, accountability to program participants is an important administrative goal. It is through participation of women who have experienced battering, interacted with collaborative agencies, or committed to systems reform, that the DAIP assesses the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Opportunities for action.

To ensure safety of and accountability to women who have been battered, the DAIP also builds women’s participation into their hiring practices, a policy board, quarterly meetings with women’s groups, involvement of shelter staff in policy decisions, and ongoing evaluation by women who have used the system.⁴² The baseline criterion for programmatic and policy decisions is the question: “Will it make her safe and free to be herself?”⁴³

Historically, one dynamic opportunity for the participation of women in the work of the DAIP was driven by the emergence of the Women’s Action Group. For over ten years this group was a model for movement organizing. Formed in 1984, the first eight women involved were interested in including survivors in policy-making levels of the DAIP and the Duluth shelter. To gain input about the needs of women, they conducted a survey followed by a community forum of respondents and women’s group participants. “Fifty-two women attended that meeting that

indicated a tremendous amount of interest that women had in participating on a policy making level in these organizations.”⁴⁴ Working in small groups, participants created a list of thirty-one recommendations to resolve issues raised by respondents. Forty-two women volunteered to follow up on these recommendations: Twenty-three of the policy recommendations were eventually adopted.⁴⁵

From these beginnings, the Women’s Action Group “came to understand that our work is about changing consciousness – ours, our friends and that of our community.”⁴⁶ Committed to action on personal, institutional, and cultural levels, by 1986 these women had presented a workshop at a National Coalition Against Domestic Violence national conference, raised money to attend out of town events, conducted a vigil, and organized protests. They made recommendations to the city council, testified, held a press conference, and attended a legislative forum and statewide rally in response to changes in welfare policies. For these women “the Action Group [gave] us a way of resisting and creating”⁴⁷

Conclusion

The strength of the battered women’s movement is grounded in relationships between activists and women who have been battered. Accountability to women is re-defined as feminist approaches are replaced by institutional practices and funding mandates. This distancing from women seeking services diminishes the relevancy of intervention strategies and the ability to adequately address the safety needs of those in crisis. Whether we see women who are battered as victims or a source of leadership and expertise requires us to examine the philosophy and process of our work. The programs of the DAIP offer one approach to re-center the voice of women at the core of both philosophy and practice.

Endnotes

- ^a The Minnesota Program Development, Inc. (www.duluth-model.org) houses the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth Family Visitation Center, Mending the Sacred Hoop, and the National Training Project. This paper is based on a content analysis of six written manuals produced by the DAIP (Pence, 1985, 1987, and 1996; Pence & Paymar, 1986, 1990, and 1993) and interviews with DAIP staff and consultants.
- ^b See *In Our Best Interests* (Pence, 1987), the DAIP guide for facilitators of women’s groups.
- ^c For definitions of the tactics of the Power and Control Wheel, see Pope and Ferraro (2006), Appendix C.

Citations

- ¹ Battered/Formerly Battered Women’s Task Force, 1992, p. 8.
- ² Schechter, 1982, p. 254.
- ³ Ritmeester, 1993, p. 177.
- ⁴ Pence 1987, p. 22.
- ⁵ Mahoney, 1994, p. 78.
- ⁶ Ibid, p. 62.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 60.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 76.
- ⁹ Hawxhurst & Morrow, 1984.
- ¹⁰ Pence, 1987, p. 112.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 5.
- ¹² Ibid, p. 22.
- ¹³ Ibid, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ Pence & Paymar, 1990, p. 18; 1993, p. 71.
- ¹⁵ Pence, 1987, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Pence & Shepard, 1988, p. 290.
- ¹⁸ Pence, 1987, p. 18.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 7.
²¹ Ibid, p. 9.
²² Ibid, p. 11.
²³ Ibid, p. 14.
²⁴ Ibid, p. 21.
²⁵ Battered/Formerly Battered Women's Task Force, 1992, p. 18.
²⁶ Ibid, p. 7.
²⁷ Ibid, p. 8.
²⁸ Pence and Shephard, 1988, p. 297.
²⁹ Ritmeester & Pence, 1992, p. 290.
³⁰ Ritmeester, 1993, p. 169.
³¹ Pence & Shephard, 1988, p. 293.
³² Pence and Paymar, 1990, p. iv.
³³ Ibid.
³⁴ Pence and Paymar, 1986, p. 238.
³⁵ Pence, 1996, p. 60.
³⁶ Pence & Shepard, 1988.
³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Pence & Paymar, 1993.
³⁹ Shepard, 1987.
⁴⁰ Pence & Shepard, 1988.
⁴¹ Shepard & Campbell, 1992: Women's Action Group, 1986.
⁴² Pence & Shepard, 1988.
⁴³ Ritmeester, 1993, p.170.
⁴⁴ Women's Action Group, 1986, p. 2.
⁴⁵ Pence & Shepard, 1988; Women's Action Group, 1986.
⁴⁶ Women's Action Group, 1986, p. 3.
⁴⁷ Ibid.

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