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Women and Violence: Breaking the Connection

Carolyn F. Swift, Ph.D.

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Women and Violence: Breaking the Connection

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Abstract

This paper explores the unhealthy connections within which violence against women occurs. Battering relationships are maintained by societal restrictions of options for women, and by institutional sanctions which serve to protect the batterer. Gender differences in the resolution of moral dilemmas, capacity for empathy and the use of power also function to maintain women in battering relationships.

Research suggests that by making healthy connections outside the battering relationship, women become empowered to overcome the societal restrictions and institutional barriers and to lead violence-free lives.

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Women and Violence: Breaking the Connection

Introduction: Relationships that go awry

In this Colloquium Series we have discussed psychological development within relationships. In assessing the significance of connection, much of this theory building takes healthy connections and growth-producing relationships as starting points. Jean Baker Miller's presentation in this series a few months ago articulated the characteristics of healthy relationships (Miller, 1986).

Tonight I want to extend that discussion by talking about relationships that go awry: unhealthy connections. My focus is not on why they go awry, although I will comment on that. My focus is on breaking the unhealthy connection. Unhealthy connections are those that do not permit growth. They lead to negative psychological and sometimes physical outcomes -- such as depression, anxiety, alienation, low self-esteem and physical injury. When relationships go awry there are two common ways to respond:

- The first way is to try to restore the relationship to a more functional mode; to stay in the relationship, but try to unlink its dysfunctional aspects.
- The second is to break the connection; to unlink the two (or more) persons through separation.

The principal point I want to make is that when relationships go awry, the most effective means either of restoring the relationship to a functional level or of breaking these connections is through *making connections*. There are many types of unhealthy connections, just as there are many types of healthy connections. My topic tonight deals with the unhealthy connections within which physical violence against women occurs. Specifically, I will speak within the context of battering relationships involving heterosexual violence in adult pairs.

Again, my major point is that the primary impetus and mechanism for breaking unhealthy connections is through making healthy connections.

There is an important point to make at the outset. I wish I could say that the larger culture has made the issue of battered women a priority for preventive work with men, and that there is a critical body of research bearing on why men batter and how to stop it. As you know, this is not the case. Almost all the research in this area focuses on the battered woman (1). In a basic sense, this is a blame-the-victim approach to the study of the crime of battering.

On the other hand, to wait for members of the dominant group to address their own violence is to leave women to suffer. Battered women need safe places to stay, people to believe them and options to insure their survival. Like many issues that the women's movement has brought out of the closet, the focus on battered women over the last decade has led to the development of shelters and some changes in law and law enforcement practice. At this time we are in the midst of a process in which women are acting individually and collectively in their own behalf, and these activities are reflected in the incredibly slow but measurable changes that have occurred in societal institutions, laws and policies as a result of women's concerted actions. It is with this process in mind that I draw heavily on the research that has grown out of the battered women's movement, particularly studies of women's shelters. I invoke this research in the spirit of women helping women to build safe spaces within a society in which we may all be counted as survivors.

While family violence is centuries old, the serious study of the subject is less than 25 years old. Traditional law and custom effectively precluded scientific interest in woman-battering until the women's movement led women themselves to question the age-old practice. Myths and stereotypes of women, which have functioned to preserve the custom of wife-beating, have stood in the way of systematic analysis. Some of these stereotypes have found their way into the annals of psychology and medicine, e.g., the folklore that women love to be beaten appears in psychoanalytic literature as the theme of women's masochism.

Two questions, formulated in the context of a patriarchal culture, continue to dominate research approaches to the phenomenon of woman-battering and to society's attempts to deal with it through legal and social remedies. These questions are:

Why don't battered women seek help in stopping the battering?

or,

Why don't they leave their battering partners?

It is in an attempt to lay the groundwork for the field to move beyond these prejudicial questions to the more significant question of why men batter their mates that I briefly address these questions and outline the significance of the role of healthy connections in breaking unhealthy connections.

In order to seek help, people have to talk about their experience, to name it and give voice to it; to do this, battered women must overcome formidable internal and external obstacles. I will review briefly some of these obstacles. The one feature that cuts across all family violence is the misuse of power. The bigger, the stronger and those with the most access to valued resources impose their will on the smaller, the weaker and those with less access to resources. Finkelhor, a leading researcher in the field of family violence, states that, "The most common patterns of family abuse are not merely for the more powerful to abuse the less powerful but for the most powerful to abuse the least....Abuse tends to gravitate to the relationship of greatest power differential" (1983, p. 18). This pattern describes the battered woman's situation both within the marriage and in the world outside when she seeks support in stopping the abuse. Police, prosecutors and judges, the clergy, and physicians are the institutional authorities whose functions most commonly bring them into contact with battered women. These authorities have a cumulative record of disbelieving the women and exercising their authority to maintain the *status quo* -- that is, to return the woman to the battering situation.

Options and sanctions

There are two classes of variables that mediate the battered woman's actions: options and sanctions. The two are very closely related. It is the balance of sanctions and options that shapes behavioral response.

Options refers to the availability of resources: economic, social and occupational. It should come as no surprise that the fewer the options the woman has -- the less access to economic, social or occupational resources -- the more likely she is to remain with the batterer. The more options she has, the more likely she is to leave him (Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Pagelow, 1982; Strube, 1984). Research shows that women are more likely to stay with men who batter them if the women:

- are poor
- are unemployed
- are in low paying jobs
- have high school (or less) education
- receive negative responses from staff of social agencies to whom they turn for help.

While these conclusions seem obvious, it is important that research corroborates common sense, precisely because earlier interpretations of battered women's behavior invoked mechanisms such as masochism and passivity to account for those women who remain in the battering relationship. There is, then, an inverse relationship between the availability of options and the likelihood that the woman will stay in the battering relationship.

Sanctions are powerful reinforcers of norms. Sanctions refer to the mechanisms in a culture that serve to control behavior. The relevant sanctions here are both external and internal. External sanctions include the law, police courts, clergy and the medical care system.

External sanctions

Law enforcement

Western law has traditionally sanctioned the abuse of women by their male partners. The notorious English "rule of thumb" forbade a man from beating his wife with a rod thicker than the width of his thumb. Although in most states in the United States wife-beating was illegal by 1870, it took another 100 years before the issue of enforcement was addressed seriously. While police receive many domestic violence calls, they make relatively few reports and even fewer arrests. Prosecutors typically elect not to file charges in these cases. Convictions in most jurisdictions are rare.

Lerman (1986), in her review of the prosecution of wife-beaters, traces the dramatic drop in the number of domestic abuse cases at each stage in the criminal justice process. This account relies heavily on her review. Out of 15,000 domestic violence calls to the police in a major mid-western city over a nine-month period in 1979, police filed reports in less than five percent of the cases, and made arrests in only three percent. The results of a Canadian study covering a one-year period showed that out of 10,000 men who assaulted their wives, only 800 were arrested and only two went to jail (Dunwoody, 1982).

After the police, prosecutors are the gatekeepers who determine whether domestic violence cases are forwarded to resolution through the courts. Lerman (1986) cites a study in which prosecutors dismissed charges in almost half (45%) of the assault cases in which arrests were made. Conviction rates for family violence are also disproportionately low. A cluster of studies suggests that the conviction rate for intra-family episodes of violence is half that for stranger-to-stranger violence (Lerman, 1986). Finally, the assignment of penalties in family violence cases shows the same pattern. A 1977 study of felony prosecution in New York conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice (found in Lerman, 1986) reported that five percent of the cases of felony assault arrests involving strangers led to jail sentences of over one year; none of the cases in which the parties had a prior relationship received jail sentences exceeding a year. This pattern of case attrition through the criminal justice system supports the conclusion that prosecution has not been an available option for most battered women.

This conclusion is particularly troubling in light of the emergence of new studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of vigorous prosecution in reducing or stopping the violence. It has long been known that it is the *certainty* of punishment, not its severity, that is effective in deterring crime (Andenaes, 1975; Erickson & Gibbs, 1973; Tittle, 1969). As we have seen, the certainty factor has historically operated in reverse in cases of family violence. Batterers have been able to break the law with virtual certainty that their behavior will incur no criminal sanctions.

However, there is now evidence that this "license to batter" is being revoked in some communities. A Justice Department study in four U.S. cities -- Brooklyn, NY; Charlotte, NC; Los Angeles, CA; and Minneapolis, MN -- demonstrated that assault victims who seek prosecution and who are supported in their action by the court system do, in fact, find the action effective in stopping the violence (Smith, 1981). Police departments have been sued because of failure of police officers to make appropriate arrests or to enforce laws ensuring the safety of family members (Lerman, 1982).

A major reason given by law enforcement officials for the lack of vigorous prosecution of domestic violence cases is the reluctance of victims to press charges. But there has been little analysis of the obstacles battered women face when they try to do so. As the above review documents, the covert protection of batterers brought about by the law enforcement system's failure to report,

prosecute and convict them effectively precludes prosecution as an option. Projecting the responsibility for non-prosecution onto the woman is the classic blame-the-victim response. "The recent experience of family violence prosecutions reveals no correlation between any identifiable characteristics of the cases or the victims and the likelihood of the victims' cooperation. The probability of victim cooperation is, in fact, better predicted by the conduct of the prosecutor than by the conduct of either the victim or the defendant" (Lerman, 1986, p. 269).

Recent studies demonstrate that if the system is changed to become more responsive to battered women, they will use the system to seek relief and justice. In Seattle, after a Battered Women's Project was initiated, two simple procedural changes resulted in more than doubling the number of cases prosecuted. One change was modifying the police form to identify domestic cases by a simple check mark. The second change involved contacting battered women in the cases identified to explore their desire to prosecute. Contacting battered women and supplying them with information about the prosecution process signals the availability of official resources to assist them. The practice of sending letters or postcards to women identified through police reports as battered has succeeded in increasing calls from these women by almost a third (Lerman, 1986). Having police pass out information cards to abuse victims is another way of indicating the system's readiness to supply resources. The domestic violence program in Philadelphia serves over 4,000 battered women annually through this means, "...more than almost any program in the country" (Lerman, 1986, p. 268). These data show the readiness of battered women to pursue justice if a system is responsive to their needs.

Another obstacle that inhibits battered women from pursuing prosecution is fear of retribution from the batterer. In evaluating witness cooperation, Cannavale (1976) found that over one-fourth feared such retaliation. This fear is realistic. One assistant district attorney reported "...that half of the victims of abuse who came to her office to drop charges were accompanied by their abusers, who had threatened them with further abuse unless they did so" (Lerman, 1986, p. 259). The Massachusetts case of Pamela Dunn is a tragic illustration of this point. When she sought legal protection from the court, the judge berated her for wasting the taxpayers' money. She was later found murdered. Her husband was convicted of her murder.

In addition to the resistance of the law enforcement system and fear of the abuser, the battered woman may not press charges in order to avoid the aversive and public label of "victim." Taylor et al.

(1983) propose that one part of victims' attempts to deal with their victimization is "by selectively evaluating themselves in ways that are self-enhancing" (1983, p. 19). A series of personal losses as well as negative social consequences come with the label of "victim." The personal losses for battered women include loss of control in the interpersonal relationship in which battering occurs and a concomitant fear of loss of control over the future, loss of physical appearance or functioning due to injury, and loss of self-esteem. "The recently-victimized have long experience with being 'normal', so they know how they had previously perceived victims. Now that they have acquired victim status, they react to themselves in part as they would react to another victim: with aversion....Thus, the looking-glass self (citation omitted) finds both the current situation and the potential future terrifying and may seek to minimize their implications by avoiding labeling the self as a victim" (Taylor et al., 1983).

Lerner's (1965, 1970) *just world* theory encapsulates the social response to victims. It is threatening to perceive others as having been randomly victimized, since aversive random events could happen to anyone, including oneself. In an effort to exclude themselves from victim status, people tend to attribute the cause of victimization to the victim's behavior or character. This pattern of blaming the victim is a familiar one in cases of domestic violence. It may be, then, that reluctance to claim the status of victim compounds the battered woman's difficulties in pursuing prosecution of the abuser.

Religion

Research has identified the clergy as the institutional resource most frequently contacted by battered women (Pagelow, 1982). The patriarchal attitudes toward battered women reported in the criminal justice system exist in organized religion as well, as confirmed in a recent survey of Protestant clergy in the United States and Canada:

One-third of the respondents felt that the abuse would have to be severe in order to justify a Christian wife leaving her husband, while 21 percent felt that no amount of abuse would justify a separation....Twenty-six percent of the pastors agreed that a wife should submit to her husband and trust that God would honor her action by either stopping the abuse or giving her the strength to endure it (Aisdurf, 1985, p. 10).

These attitudes result in discounting violence as grounds for dissolving the marriage. While the victim-blaming prevalent in the criminal justice system is damaging to women's self-esteem and blocks access to redress through the system, these attitudes within the clergy are particularly destructive to the woman who places her faith in her religion. For it is then not only "men" and the laws of men that condemn her to remain in the battering situation. The divine law of the God she believes in and trusts to deliver her is invoked to reinforce her status as a prisoner of the custom and practice of marital violence.

Medicine

In addition to police and clergy, physicians are prominent among the front-line workers whose responsibilities bring them into contact with battered women. Physicians are generally held to underestimate abuse by not identifying cases in their practice. The results of a survey of helping professionals showed that physicians and clergy identified the lowest number of abused women, while social workers identified the largest number (Burris, 1984), suggesting that physicians are unaware of the violence. However, Stark et al. (1979) discovered that battered women are more likely than other injured women to leave the emergency room with a prescription for pain medication. Semmelman (1982) found that four times as many battered as non-battered women in shelters were taking psychotropic medication. "Despite its failure to 'see,' medicine responds in distinct and punitive ways to battered women....By decontextualizing emergent social problems and treating the psychosocial consequences of abuse as an occasion for family maintenance, medicine helps stabilize families in which escalating violence is inevitable" (Stark, 1984). Treating battered women with medication without investigating and taking into consideration their abusive situations raises serious ethical issues. The medication that blunts the pain also blunts the woman's alertness to personal danger, and thus her capacity to defend herself or to engage in effective problem solving.

Family

The value of supportive relationships for healthy functioning and for buffering the destructive effects of stress has been documented extensively (Gottlieb, 1981, 1983; Mitchell & Trickett, 1980). Confronted with life changes, most people turn to family, friends and neighbors for help. This traditional network of supports breaks down for the female target of male violence.

For the battered woman it is the spouse or partner who inflicts pain. She suffers not only the pain of the attack. She loses the support of her primary relationship as well. Further, relatives and

friends often side with the attacker. In these cases close network ties then serve to maintain the violence.

The assumption that the kin network will be opposed to violence is not necessarily correct. For example, a number of women indicated that when they left their husbands because of a violent attack, their mothers responded with urgings for the wife to deal with the situation by being a better housekeeper, by being a better sex partner, or just by avoiding him, etc. In some cases, the advice was "You have to put up with it for the sake of the kids -- that's what I did!" (Straus, 1980, p. 246).

Studies of residents of battered women's shelters shed light on the influence of social networks on women's decisions to leave or return to the batterer. Dalto (1983) found that the more the woman believed significant people in her life to be approving of a reconciliation, the more likely she was to return to the batterer. In another study, 95% of the women who left the batterer had networks that encouraged leaving, while only 70% of the women who returned to the batterer had such networks. Those who returned had received network feedback that they would receive little network assistance if they left (Butehorn, 1985). Alcorn (1984) found that the presence of a key figure who provided multi-dimensional support was a significant network factor in supporting women to leave their violent partners.

Internal sanctions

Here I am referring to sanctions which women have internalized and which are integrally tied to their sense of identity. These sanctions operate as powerful reinforcers of the norms society has established for women's role in maintaining relationships. In the context of family violence there are three significant areas in which women's experience and internal sanctions differ from those of men:

- ethics
- epistemology
- the use of power

There is evidence that males and females resolve moral problems differently, weigh information differently, and use power differently.

Ethics

Carol Gilligan (1982) outlines two major approaches to the resolution of ethical dilemmas. It is clear that both males and females have access to both approaches. It is also clear that in Western patriarchal culture males tend to use one approach predominantly, while females tend to use both. The first approach sees ethical problems as occasions for the creation or enforcement of rules. These rules spell out the rights of those involved. Rules and rights are seen as necessary to define the outer limits and to ensure the exercise of autonomy. Autonomy in this view is a highly desired state or goal. An ethic that emphasizes rights and rules, and one that is grounded in autonomy as the organizing principle, is the predominant ethic in Western patriarchal culture.

Another approach to the resolution of ethical problems sees the problems in the context of the relationships in which they are embedded. In this approach there is an attempt to identify and assign responsibilities in a way that maintains caring and connectedness. In our culture, the ethic of responsibility, caring and connectedness is more likely to be implemented by women.

Gilligan traces the origins of the two ethics to the different relationships the two sexes have with the mother from birth. For present purposes, it is important only to note that men, when faced with an ethical dilemma, are more likely to resolve it by asserting their rights, invoking rules and, more often than not, seeking to preserve their autonomy. Women, on the other hand, are likely to consider the impact of various solutions on the relationship involved and to opt for assigning responsibility in such a way as to preserve these connections -- in as caring a way as possible. Women tend to value relationships more highly than autonomy (Miller, 1976; Lewis, 1976; Block, 1978), while the opposite is true for men. This difference is extremely important for an understanding of family violence, since it means that women will be more devoted to preserving the relationship even through the stress of violence.

Epistemology

Another area of difference between the sexes that has implications for family violence is epistemology. Cognitive development scholars Clinchy & Zimmerman (1985) and Belenky et al. (1986) have described several approaches to "knowing," two of which are especially pertinent to this topic. One approach, based on Perry's (1970, 1981) work, emphasizes a method of thinking that uses objective criteria to analyze new information. The analysis compares the information with what is

already known, notes the differences and tests it against established standards. Clinchy and Zimmerman (1985) call this type of knowing "separate" in reference to the autonomous nature of the self in making comparisons and seeing differences.

The second approach to knowing involves not separating the self from what is to be known, but entering into the new frame of reference in order to understand it. It is this type of knowing, called "connected" knowing, that leads to the experience of empathy. Clinchy and Zimmerman give the example of students studying a poem. Those using the method of "separate" knowing ... "ask themselves, 'What standards are being used to evaluate my analysis of this poem? What techniques can I use to analyze it?' The orientation is toward impersonal rules and procedures" (p. 3). Those using the method of "connected" knowing ask, "What is this poet trying to say to me?" (p. 3). The orientation here is to place the self in the poem to understand the author's meaning.

It is the thesis of these scholars that connected knowing is more often found in women, although both separate and connected knowing are used by both sexes. The significance of this difference in understanding situations of family violence is that the woman is more likely to feel and to relate to the pain of the other (i.e., the male partner). This capacity for feeling the other's pain may contribute to the woman's lesser readiness to initiate or return violence -- a position that places her at a disadvantage in protecting herself against her partner's violence.

Ruddick's (1984) illuminating account of what she calls "maternal thinking" focuses on the ways in which maternal practices have shaped the thinking process. While both sexes have the capacity to engage in maternal thinking, it is found more often in women because of their more intimate connection with and greater responsibility for child rearing. The demands of both the child and the culture shape maternal practice, and determine the priorities of maternal thinking. These priorities are to preserve life, to foster growth and to shape growth into forms acceptable to the culture at large. Confronted with the responsibility of the life of another human being, the maternal parent develops an attitude Ruddick calls "holding." This attitude values keeping over acquiring. Its aims are to conserve and maintain resources to sustain the fragility of life. "It is an attitude elicited by the work of 'world protection, world preservation, world repair...the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life'" (Ruddick, 1984, p. 217).

The foundation of maternal thought lies in the capacity to attend to and love the other, prototypically the child. This capacity for attention and love are expressed in the question, "What are you going through?" (Ruddick, 1984, p. 224) and in the empathy required to hear the response. While maternal thinking has its roots in the mother-child relationship, the bonding of self-interest with the interests of the cared-for other forms a characteristic of intimate relationships for women.

Because maternal thinking is centered on the experience of the other, because its priorities are to preserve the safety and foster the growth of the other, the maternal thinker is singularly unprepared to defend herself against attack from a significant other. Defense against physical attack requires an understanding of personal risk as separate from the attacker's risk. Habituated to focusing attention on feeling what the other is going through, the maternal thinker is psychologically unequipped to make the abrupt and sudden shift of attention from other to self needed to mobilize energy for self defense.

Many women subjected to battering do not make this shift. Mills (1985), in a series of interviews with women who have been battered, notes a loss of self that occurs over time. She sees this loss as taking two forms, a loss of identity and a loss of what she calls the observing self. Many of the women interviewed described an incapacity to act: "like: 'being in a shell,' 'like a zombie'" (1985, p. 113). Finding their judgments and perceptions about the relationship shattered, suffering the shock and pain of attack, they have few resources -- either within themselves or in the world outside themselves -- to stop the violence or to restore their sense of self.

Other women victimized by battering partners react by consciously choosing not to defend themselves. For many, this strategy is calculated to heal some past wound perceived in the batterer, and to create the opportunity for growth in the relationship. The following first-person accounts of battered women illustrate this strategy:

Deb: I feel he can be helped with treatment. I know he feels rejected because, of all his brothers and sisters, he was the only one they gave away. So, I thought that he was trying to make me give him away just like everybody else. So, I thought if I didn't play his game, if I don't reject him, he would get over it (Mills, 1985, p. 110).

Maggie: I think a reason I got a Master's in social work was to see what could be done. That's what I wrote my thesis on -- how to help the men. I spent the first year trying to find out how to make it different so we could have a good marriage (Mills, 1985, p. 110).

I had the idea that I'm doing this for him. I'm coping. I'm controlling the amount of abuse I'm taking. I must be a good person. The importance I got was what I was doing for him (Schechter, 1982, p. 13).

While Ruddick's maternal thinking has clear benefits for children, it contributes to the physical and psychological destruction of women who are paired with violent partners.

Power

The third area of difference concerns power. The discussion here is based on the work of Jean Baker Miller (1976, 1982). Issues of power, like those of morality and knowing, are viewed differently by the sexes. Males tend to define power in terms of the capacity to effect their will, with or without the consent of those involved. Domination is a key concept in the male definition and exercise of power. Miller's definition -- and one that more accurately represents women's experience of exercising power -- is that power is the capacity to effect change, to move something from point A to point B.

In our patriarchal society, women have not been viewed as needing to exercise power. By custom, the two have been seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, women do exercise power. However, they are more likely than men to do this in the service of others. One primary way women "empower" others is by promoting the growth and development of children -- in psychological, social and intellectual spheres. Another way is by promoting their mate's growth and development. Women have traditionally provided psychological and material support to further their husbands' goals, autonomy and success in the world outside the home.

For women to use their power to effect change -- to move something from point A to point B -- in their own self-interest threatens patriarchal values, and may invoke frightening images in the women, themselves.

Miller (1982) identifies three fears women associate with the exercise of power in their own self-interest: fear of being selfish, fear of being destructive, and fear of being abandoned by those they care about. Enhancing one's own power in our culture is often connected with reducing the power of another. Women fear that to act in their own self-interest risks the possibility of putting down others; such action is seen as selfish. To act in one's own self-interest, when one is a member of a subordinate group, is often to act in ways inimical to the interests of the dominant group; such actions may in fact alter or even destroy the arrangements perpetuated by the dominant group. According to Miller:

...women have lived as subordinates and, as subordinates, have been led by the culture to believe that their own self-determined action is wrong and evil. Many women have incorporated deeply the inner notion that such action must be destructive....In most institutions it is still true that if women do act from their own perceptions and motivations, directly and honestly, they indeed may be disrupting a context which has not been built out of women's experience. Thus, one is confronted with feeling as if one must do something very powerful that also feels destructive (Miller, 1982, p. 4).

The fear of being abandoned is related to the other two fears. If women do act in their own self-interest, and if these actions disrupt existing relationships, then women may suffer attack or abandonment as a consequence. Miller points out, "...all of us exist only as we need others for that existence. Men tend to deny this; women have incorporated this in an extreme form. Along with it we women have incorporated the troubling notion that, as much as we need others, we also have powers and motivations to use those powers, but if we use them, we will destroy the relationships we need for our existence" (p. 4).

Irene Stiver (1984) notes that a man's sense of masculinity is threatened if he acknowledges dependency needs, or if sensitivity or empathy is required in a relationship with a woman. "Men also feel very threatened by the woman's expression of painful feelings, since they need to ward them off in themselves; thus the man often reacts with impatience and anger -- which communicates again to the woman that her needs are not legitimate and that she is not worthy" (Stiver, 1984, p. 8)

In a study of images of violence in Thematic Apperception Test stories, using college students as subjects, Pollock and Gilligan (1982) found that the closer together the people were shown to be,

the more violence men saw and described; the farther apart the people in the picture were, the more violence women saw and described.

Janet Surrey (Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1982), in her paper on the development of self in women, makes the point that the daughter's identification with the mother leads women to play the more nurturant role in relationships. And Kaplan notes that women are trained for the empathic qualities of mothering.

Women, then, are at an immense psychological as well as physical disadvantage in resolving conflicts in marital situations. First, they place the highest priority on preserving the relationship -- on staying connected -- when disputes arise. Second, the woman's capacity to "know" the other in connected, empathic ways -- rather than in the critical, objective ways characterized by "separate" knowing -- makes her the partner more likely to feel the pain of the other, even in the midst of her own pain. And, third, in abuse situations women are double-bound in attempting to use their power in their own interest. If they act to save their physical selves by leaving to avoid being battered, they risk destroying their primary relationship and their economic security. If they act to preserve the primary relationship and their economic security, they put themselves at risk of physical destruction. Women in battering situations are forced to choose which parts of themselves they will save: their physical safety and well-being, or their economic safety and well-being. Is it surprising that many women find this a difficult choice to make?

The restorative and healing function of connection

First, it is important that the healing connection be outside the system of violence. These connections, often empathic in the sense discussed by Jordan (1984) and Jordan, Surrey and Kaplan (1982), lead to action, growth and change for the woman.

Examples illustrating the function of "outside" connections come from therapy situations, and from research based on women who seek the safety of shelters.

One weekend I took an overdose of pills and had to go to the hospital. So, they said since I took an overdose I had to see a psychiatrist. And the funny thing about it,

he said the problem was my husband and not me. He said that if I got away from him, I'd be a lot better off. I thought that was pretty good because I thought maybe I was the one that was crazy (Mills, 1985, p. 115).

One woman decided to leave her husband instead of seeking temporary shelter after talking with a therapist:

She convinced me that my life was in danger. I realize now that it was. I was ignoring a lot of signs even though I was in the middle of it (Mills, 1985, p.116). He told me he needs me. He said it looks like he can't live without me. He says, "I know I am wrong, and I'm sorry", and I told him, "One day you are going to hit me, and you'll have to do without me forever because I'll be dead (Mills, 1985).

Shelter research (Dalto, 1983; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Okun, 1983; Snyder & Scheer, 1981) shows that women are more likely to leave their battering partners if they have:

- formed close relationships in the shelter with other residents,
- identified with a shelter role model,
- stayed in the shelter longer (length of stay correlated with leaving partner),
- returned to the shelter more times (separated from the batterer more times).

This research suggests that the new connections made in the shelter (or with a therapist or other person "outside the system of violence") are instrumental in facilitating "leaving" the battering partner.

What sorts of things are happening within these relationships that might explain the movement and change in these women? Jean Baker Miller (1986) has identified five characteristics of growth-enhancing relationships. Reviewing these in the context of relationships formed in women's shelters suggests some answers.

Zest

The first characteristic deals with emotional states -- both quality and intensity. Miller talks about zest in emotional connection. She refers to an increase in feelings of vitality, aliveness and energy. These feelings are in direct contrast to those described by the battered women in Mills' study.

They described themselves as like "a mechanical robot," "being numb," and "like being dead." (Mills, 1985, p. 113).

By making new connections, these women come alive again. In the shelter, one woman can talk to another or to a group of other women about her feelings and thoughts. She can represent her experience as it comes to her. The shelter experience promotes authenticity and courage in that the woman is, in Miller's terms, "feeling these feelings and thinking these thoughts" as she shares them. To quote, "...it is from many experiences of feeling other people's caring and concern for her...that (she) can build the vitality that sustains psychological development. And it is from not enough of this experience that the reverse occurs" (1986, p. 8).

Action

Action is defined as feeling empowered to act in the immediate relationship as well as beyond it. Many battered women do not feel free to represent their experience actively by speaking up or taking action in the battering situation itself for fear of further brutalization. Mills (1985) notes that a characteristic response reported by battered women is to placate the partner. This finding may hold only for certain groups of women. Most of the research on battered women has drawn on the experience of white women. According to Theresa Perry (1986), a common response for black women is to fight back. This response is dramatically illustrated in Walker's (1982) book, *The Color Purple*, and in the movie of the same name. Also illustrated in that work is the importance of the connection between the two sisters in protecting and supporting each other against male violence.

In the shelter, the most likely actions are those directed to problem solving within the relationships -- exploring options together and engaging in empathic interchanges. Part of what happens in the shelter appears to be a re-evaluation of the battering relationship in which women come to see that the batterer is unlikely to change. This hypothesis is supported by shelter research (Butehorn, 1985; Dalto, 1983; Porter, 1983; Strube, 1984) that shows that women are more likely to leave their battering partners if:

- they believe the violence is unavoidable.
- they believe they cannot control the violence,
- they believe the battering partner will not stop,
- they believe the battering partner does not love them.

As a result of acting in these relationships the women feel empowered to act in realms beyond the shelter connections. For example, some women may leave their batterers to seek help from social agencies beyond the shelter, and to begin their lives apart from the batterers. Other women may feel empowered to go back and try again to manage the relationship.

More knowledge – of self and other

This is one of the benefits in relationships that are going right. Each person makes a step toward a fuller, more accurate picture of the self as well as of the other person. In relationships that go wrong, such as the battering relationship, the woman loses what she once knew about herself. She loses basic information about her identity and self. Mills cites the experience of a woman trying to make sense of her husband's criticism of her as a mother:

I felt where I was at the place where I couldn't take care of them.

He would talk about the house not being cleaned up. And for a while I was baby-sitting and I kept five kids plus my two, and I would clean up the house all day long behind them. I couldn't stand anything nasty. And the mothers would pick the kids up and ask me, "How in the world do you keep your house so clean?" Then he would come home and talk about the house being filthy (Mills, 1985, p. 115).

The woman is faced with having to reconcile her own image of herself with the discrepant images of herself reflected by the batterer:

According to him, I couldn't do anything right. I am a real homemaker. Make all my own clothes. I was trying hard to cook and all that. And there was always something wrong with everything I did (Mills, 1985, p. 112).

I felt like I had done everything I could. But he got me to feeling so inadequate sometimes I was wondering, "God, am I so inadequate that I don't know if I'm not doing it right?" (Mills, 1985, p. 113).

Another woman questions her ability to observe what was happening:

The thing I wondered was, "Am I imagining how dangerous it is? Has my fear become obsessive for me rather than there really being something to be afraid of?" In the light of day and once he got sober, "Well, it is not quite as dangerous as I thought." I was ignoring the cuts and bruises (Mills, 1985, p. 113).

These continuing losses of what the women thought they knew about themselves are a form of psychological battering: they describe their loss of self as "not being whole," "having something stolen from you," "lost everything about me" (Mills, 1985).

In the shelter relationships, on the other hand, the woman can begin to develop an accurate picture of herself. She knows more about fear, sadness, rage and anger through the process of expressing these feelings and having them corroborated and validated by others. This experience facilitates unlinking these feelings from blame and guilt. A woman's increased knowledge of herself may lead her to start a new life without the battering partner.

Increased sense of self-worth

A fourth characteristic of good relationships is an increase in one's sense of worth. It is commonly believed that battered women have low self-esteem. This is a complicated issue. Research results are contradictory. Certainly the batterer's behavior is directed to making her feel bad about herself. We are diminished when the feelings we have are those we have been taught are bad. Battered women have many such feelings, including rage/anger, fear, resentment, hostility, shame and guilt. In the shelter these feelings are attended to and recognized. To have her experience recognized and attended to without negative attribution gives the battered woman sanction to think these thoughts and have these feelings and to recognize these same feeling-thoughts in others. These interchanges restore her integrity and increase her sense of self-worth.

Motivation for more connection

Finally, one result of relationships that are going well is the desire for more of the same. There is a greater sense of connection and, also, increased motivation for connection in order to feel *more zest, more energy, more knowledge, more worth, and more empowerment*. The opposite of this process occurs in the battering relationship. The woman becomes increasingly isolated from others

through her partner's insistence that she drop connections to others, and through her desire to deny and hide the abuse.

I was involved with a group of people in town: political people, attorneys. We'd see each other professionally a lot. All that has had to stop since we got married. He's totally jealous of any people in my life and doesn't believe you can be just friends with a man. So, I had to cut those ties (Mills, 1985, p. 108).

The shelter experience functions to restore her pleasure and faith in connection and to motivate her to seek further connections. To quote Miller, "In general, so long as people can see a possibility of engaging with the other person in thoughts and feelings -- a possibility of connecting -- they can grapple with a problem....It is when there seems to be no possibility of engaging with the feelings and thoughts at hand, no way to move within the relationship, that the most trouble occurs" (1986, p. 15).

In closing, I would like to point out that battered women represent, at the microcosmic level, the situation all of us, as women, find ourselves in at the macrocosmic level. We are the battered woman writ large. We are all, women, connected to or in relationship with a battering culture. The statistics on violence against women are too well known to require elaboration -- in addition to battering, one out of four women will be raped during her lifetime. We are bombarded with routine and gratuitous violence against women on television and in our newspapers and magazines. Our sisters who are labeled as battered are simply more visible. They bear the outward physical signs and the more acute physical pain. Our physically battered sisters have blazed trails for the rest of us. Against immense odds, they have created options for going on, for finding ways to *be* -- ways to survive in a battering environment. We are grateful to them for their leadership in pointing the way out. Shelters are the safe houses women have created to find refuge from battering partners.

As women in a battering culture, where can we go to escape? Camus said somewhere that in order to critique this world, it is necessary to find another world to stand on. Where is that other world, that world outside the battering environment?

Where are our safe houses?

How can we break that connection?

Footnote

(1) A recent review of the literature by the author found that nine out of ten studies of battering focus on the battered woman, with little or no attention to the batterer. When the batterer is studied, the methodology often involves eliciting information about him from the battered woman rather than from the abuser himself (e.g., see Walker, 1982).

Discussion summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held so that students and visitors can exchange ideas with each other and with the speaker. Portions of the discussion are summarized, edited and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker's ideas. In this session Drs. Alexandra Kaplan, Janet Surrey and Irene Stiver joined Dr. Swift in leading the discussion.

Comment: I've lived in a battering relationship because I thought that's the way the world lived. Having been an abused child and not ever having seen anything different from that, when someone would say to me, "You're in an abusive relationship," I'd say, "You're crazy," because I did not know. I think that's where a lot of women come from.

Swift: The situation you describe is very common and very difficult. What was it that changed that for you?

Comment: When one of my children became suicidal. I knew something had to be wrong for that to happen. I went to a family program because of this problem and that's when I started to realize that there was something going on within the family system that was wrong. But only because of that.

Swift: That's a very powerful experience. I think you, too, are saying that by making some connections outside the system you were empowered to see the dynamics of what was going on within the system.

I think your experience helps to make clear for therapists how many women view this situation. The therapist's role is a difficult one because as a therapist you are not a blank slate yourself. You have your own feelings about the battering.

Kaplan: I think that working with abused women is one of the most powerful experiences for a therapist. The intense emotion and the feeling of connection to the woman can be so compelling. In part there is the sense that of course the women need to leave and you have a real wish to rescue. It's more than a rescue fantasy because it feels like life and death. Therapists need to identify, address and understand our own reactions to battered women.

Comment: Are you saying that in some way the woman who is being battered has empathy for some of the problems of the batterer, and has more empathy with his problems than for herself?

Swift: Yes, and I think that the quotations I read from the women illustrated this point. I think that's what adds to the complexity of the women's reactions in this situation. We tend to be the people who work to understand and to take care of the relationship, to feel the other's pain in the same way that we do when we mother our children. The mother-child relationship in some ways parallels some of these battering relationships. The women may act as mothers to the males, who behave like children in their temper tantrums and loss of control. When a child -- say, two years old -- stamps her/his feet and pounds against the mother's knees and says, "If you won't let me have the candy I hate you, I hate you, I'm going to kill you," she may tolerate that outburst because she may believe the child can't control feelings at that age. That same kind of model may occur in the battering relationship, with the woman seeing herself as the one who should be strong, able to feel the pain of the other, and to tolerate that.

Comment: Are you saying that in acting to maintain this connection she is invalidating her own pain?

Swift: Invalidate wouldn't be the word I would use. It would be that she sees herself strong enough to sustain whatever blows the husband inflicts in order to be strong for both of them.

Surrey: I think it's partly the issue of, "I can take it." This focus doesn't necessarily invalidate her pain. The psychological pains can often be experienced in some way as more painful and enduring whereas the physical can be seen as non-enduring.

Stiver: I think also that many (not all) of the women are married to men who are not only batterers but who have failed in other ways. I think probably a lot of times these women have to take on enormous responsibility just to keep the family going. They have to take the responsibility of raising the kids, and sometimes for earning the money. Many times these men batter out of their desperation in terms of their failure in life. That is part of what happens.

Swift: It's certainly true that with increasing unemployment there is increasing family violence -- child abuse, spouse abuse. There is often increasing alcoholism, drug abuse in the men -- all of that. The man's self-esteem as the breadwinner, as the person who can support the family, is threatened. Some investigators believe that this situation contributes to battering behavior.

Comment: What about the sons in these families when they have a father like that as the model, what is the effect on them?

Swift: There are two streams of research that bear on that. One is the finding that a high proportion of men who batter come from homes where their fathers battered; so they observe that battering and it serves as a model for them. The second is the current research on the children in battering families, which shows there are a number of problems that appear to result -- such as school problems, lower self-esteem and hostility toward the mother. Another observation is that a son who has grown up in a battering home may, as a teenager, batter his mother.

Comment: Sometimes when I am lecturing about wife battering someone says, "Aha, but some women batter their husbands; therefore we must call it spouse abuse." They want to say that you have to look at the issues as totally co-ed. What do you think about that?

Swift: There was a national study which introduced into the literature the issue called "battered husbands." One researcher wrote an article saying that there was a higher frequency of battered husbands than battered wives. As you can imagine, that article called forth a lot of heat. There was a series of refutations of both the data and the interpretation of the data. There is no question that there is an enormous differential in battering that's gender based. Women are the victims of battering more frequently and they suffer more severe injuries than men.

The issue of battered husbands is one that's been fairly well put to rest. I don't mean it's not happening, but I'm saying the incidence and severity of injury is much lower for men than for women.

Comment: I want to ask about rearing girls in all families. Is there anything one can do to help women respond in a powerful, effective way if they should find themselves in a battering relationship?

Swift: I will give you my personal reaction to that. The first time this happens in a relationship, the woman should simply leave the relationship. I think women should teach their daughters and their sons that people are not for hitting, and teach their daughters to value themselves and to know that they should not stay in a relationship where physical violence occurs,

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