

'Innovation should not be Treason': Domestic Violence Interventions

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The deterministic ideology of political correctness which sanctions particular interventions permissible to use in domestic violence situations has not only thwarted creativity in the therapeutic field and ignored the interactional aspects of these complex relationships and the inherent opportunities for positive change, but has placed many women victims in danger unnecessarily. It is time to challenge simplistic models of domestic violence and develop feminist-sensitive multiple approaches to this serious and complex social problem.

INTRODUCTION

Theory will determine how phenomena are explained, but how many clinicians recognise the limitations and implications of their own theoretical constructs? I recall a fleeting moment in the staff room of a multidisciplinary counselling service: a student's perfectly normal excitable behaviour was coolly diagnosed as 'mania' by the psychiatric social worker. How easy it is to slot individuals into our favourite theoretical box without thinking how this might limit both the individual's—and our own—potential. When we are confident that we understand, curiosity is forsaken and we experience the illusion of expertise. Einstein stated that: 'Curiosity is a delicate little plant which, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom' (Einstein, in Cline, 1987: 64).

Someone once told me the story about a huge truck which became stuck under a railway bridge and, despite expert advice, could not be released without causing extensive structural damage to the bridge. For some time, a small boy had been watching the engineering experts pondering the problem. Finally he stepped forward and said: 'Excuse me mister, why don't you let down the truck's tyres?' They did, and the problem was resolved.

The illusion of expertise is particularly apparent in the government-funded domestic violence services in Australia. Their ideologically-driven sociopolitical analysis of domestic violence has curtailed the options available to their client group and stymied creativity in the field (Parham, 1994; Wileman, 1995). An example is the Men's Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs in Queensland (a Coordinated Community Response (CCR) based on the Duluth Minnesota model and adopted by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (DFYCC),

1997) in which funding is contingent upon the implementation of practice standards consistent with that particular model. CCR is a popular treatment program but there is no scientific evidence proving its effectiveness (see Jacobson and Gottman, 1998: 231).

Moreover, some of DFYCC's practice standards are discriminatory and restrictive to those agencies which have developed their own practice standards, methods of intervention and codes of ethical and responsible practice. For example, one practice standard is that 'program facilitators must actively participate in domestic violence networks' (10). It is possible to subscribe to feminist ideals of justice and safety without being an active participant in the domestic violence networks. Another practice standard which 'must' be put in place is a 'mandatory reporting procedure' with facilitators reporting threats or acts of violence and breaches of Protection Orders (9). Firstly, this could result in breakdown in trust between group facilitators and group participants, leading to negative treatment outcomes, especially with non-mandated clients. Secondly, it does not do justice to the complex reasons why breaches occur (some of which are by mutual consent), or to the skill and expertise of facilitators to challenge and change both these and other unlawful behaviours.

Moreover, in defending and promoting the only analysis of domestic violence considered correct, the domestic violence collective is at risk of using against those who disagree with them the same coercive tactics of intimidation and control as does their abusive male client group. Professional judgment may be impaired in such circumstances. For example, the Queensland Domestic Violence Services Network has lobbied widely throughout Australia against the sale and distribution of my book *How To Stop Domestic Violence: A Victim's Guide* (Wileman and Wileman, 1997) and stock was returned from a Townsville bookseller with a note explaining that: 'I have been requested by the local Domestic Violence Prevention Unit to not stock this title'. Einstein (1943) wrote:

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‘The search for truth and knowledge is one of the highest qualities of man—though often the pride in such is most loudly voiced by those who strive for it the least.’

Goldner has expressed concern about a polarisation in the treatment system which mirrors the polarisation of the families affected by domestic violence. She argues that ‘Multiple viewpoints and models that are thoughtfully conceived, richly described, and empirically documented are urgently needed since the field of domestic violence has been chronically burdened by ideological division (1998: 264). The therapeutic challenge is to remove one’s politically-correct glasses and begin to see differently. Only then will creative thinking flourish, with new territory being mapped out along the journey of recovery and change.’

THE POLITICALLY CORRECT POSITION

- Men are considered 100% to blame for their violence. Women are not responsible for men’s violence (The National Committee on Violence Against Women (NCVAW), 1992). This is a vital belief which has been enshrined in legislation to ensure that responsibility for violence rests with the abuser, not the abused.
- Women are considered to be powerless to effect change in the cycle of violence (Walker, 1978; Schechter, 1982; Denzin, 1984; Condonis, Paroissien and Aldrich, 1989; Horsfall, 1991). As the abuser is 100% to blame for his violence only he bears the responsibility for emotional and behavioural change.
- Separation from the abuser and legal remedies (Walker, 1978; Denzin, 1984; Margolin & Fernandez, 1987; Van Hasselt, Morrison, Bellack and Hersen, 1988; Condonis et al., 1989; Shaw and Pye, 1995) are considered to be the only solutions that women victims can implement. This further underscores the importance of the abuser being held accountable for his violence.
- If women are involved in the change process this may lead to them feeling blamed and becoming disempowered further (McGregor, 1990; Kaufman, 1992; NCVAW, 1992). This is to counteract the destructive victim-blaming analyses of domestic violence.

These assumptions offer women victims only two possibilities for halting the violence perpetrated against them. They can either leave the relationship permanently and/or take out a Domestic Violence Order (DVO). If they are too afraid to leave, do not wish to separate or are ambivalent about leaving, the law is their only remaining option. For some abusers, being issued with a DVO may lead to a genuine examination of their abusive behaviours and a determination to change, whereas others may become more violent and seek revenge. In the latter, homicide is a very real possibility, because such individuals have few inhibitions about hurting people, having internalised an ‘ethic of vengeance’ (Sykes Wylie, 1998: 30). Finally, if the abused woman is engaging in abusive–defensive behaviours which place her at risk of further abuse, these will not be addressed because to do so might be seen as ‘blaming the victim’.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Men are 100% responsible for their violence. Women are not responsible for men’s violence *but they are responsible for their own behaviour* (Wileman, 1995; Wileman and Wileman, 1995; 1997). This view acknowledges that an interactional process is taking place, without apportioning blame to the victim. Over the past decade Goldner and her associates have developed a feminist-informed multi-faceted therapeutic approach for couples where violence is the presenting problem. The abuser is held accountable for his violence and the victim for her safety, a distinction in responsibilities which is vital to the reduction of violence (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg and Walker, 1990; Goldner, 1998).

Women are not powerless to effect change in their partner’s violent behaviours. The interactional aspects of these relationships cannot be ignored (Wileman, 1995; Wileman and Wileman, 1995; 1997). Goldner (1998: 266) acknowledges the interactional process whilst simultaneously rejecting the ‘offensive presumption of mutual responsibility’. The abuser is held fully accountable for his violence, with violent behaviour becoming the primary target of intervention.

Women are capable of making the distinction between influencing a partner’s behaviour and assuming responsibility for it (Wileman, 1995; Wileman and Wileman, 1995; 1997). This is a distinction which is relevant in all human interactions and especially in child rearing which is women’s expert domain.

This alternative view challenges the notion that women victims of domestic violence are helpless in the face of violence and innocent in its commission. There is a complex web of interactions taking place in domestic violence relationships which can minimise or intensify the risk of violence. Violent patterns will change when abusive men learn to exercise self-control and assume responsibility for their violence and/or when their victims understand the men with whom they live (rather than being beguiled by their good side), and learn to actively care for themselves, ensuring their own safety. Goldner (1998: 267) states that feminism offers a ‘fundamental, ethical and political framework’ for responsible practice but once the moral position has been established, there needs to be room for different approaches to domestic violence.

To insist upon the application of political correctness in domestic violence interventions simplifies a complex relationship by placing the spotlight on patriarchy and ignoring, or understating, the biological, psychological and sociological antecedents of violent behaviour. This view deprives the perpetrator of his humanity (Goldner, et al., 1990) and the differences between the perpetrator and his victim may become huge and insurmountable.

Her suffering will be apparent but his suffering will go unnoticed

It is well documented that abused women become increasingly dispirited and downtrodden and they will suffer from a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems associated with that abuse (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Garber and Seligman, 1980; Carmen,

Rieker and Mills, 1984; Rowan, 1985; Roberts, 1990; Jordan, Kraus and Ware, 1993; Gottman, 1994). Alternatively, most abusers are likely to suffer shame and guilt and if we, in our professional roles, fail to recognise that, it may not be possible to develop empathy with them. For instance, when an abuser is denying and projecting his anger or feelings of powerlessness onto you, if you are unable to recognise the process and contain its affect, then you are at risk of becoming angry and confrontational. Another example would be negative labelling: when a perpetrator expresses emotional pain it may be interpreted as another ploy to get his own way.

Moreover, the (non-psychopathic) abusive man becomes highly anxious whenever his partner withdraws from him emotionally, and/or physically, and his cruelty towards her is often a 'frantic protest against the loss of attachment' (Johnson, 1997: 40). Pistole (1994: 149) contrasts the 'securely attached', who respond accurately to '... attachment cues', with those who are insecurely attached. The latter either shut down their attachment system, or become hyper-responsive to any perceived threat of separation and rejection. Whenever the insecure abuser is struggling with the threat of abandonment, he experiences a depth of suffering which is so profound that it feels as if his survival is being threatened. Women victims may also be struggling with abandonment issues following savage periods of rejection, attacks and separations, which paradoxically may intensify their investment in the relationship. Given that 'attachment behaviour is terminated by comfortable caregiving' (Radojevic, 1996: 34), it is both callous and highly dangerous to respond to the abuser unempathically and punitively at this time and unrealistic to expect his partner to ignore his attempts to win her back.

His aggression will be apparent but hers will go unnoticed

On one hand, it is well documented that men are primarily the perpetrators of violence and that domestic violence is a leading cause of physical and emotional injury to women (Dobash and Dobash, 1979, 1980; Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force, 1988; Scutt, 1990; NCVAW, 1991; Nolan, 1993; Wileman, 1995; Anderson and Cramer-Benjamin, 1999). On the other hand, some victims either initiate the violence or respond aggressively to their partner's controlling and abusive behaviours. If we, as therapists, fail to recognise that, we may exacerbate the situation by seemingly colluding with the woman, or worse still, we may fail to warn her of the dangerous aspects of her own behaviour. The story of Joan and her children illustrates this point.

Joan (not her real name) had been physically, sexually and emotionally abused all her life—first by her father, then by her older brothers and later in all her subsequent relationships. She had sustained black eyes, severe bruising, cut lips and broken bones. Joan did not simply sit back and take this abuse. She was feisty, determined, and competitive and she would fight back and sometimes emerged the winner. She was proud of these qualities and dismissive of the typical 'victim' who she saw as oppressed, depressed and non-coping and, therefore, 'pathetic' by Joan's standards. If Joan believed that she was in a winning position

she would taunt her partner and scream abuse and obscenities at him. She always felt better after she had done that. She explained that it got rid of all her pent-up anger and she also felt good that she had 'won the war'. For instance, when she had been subjected to abuse by her partner, Joan sometimes managed to barricade herself in the bathroom where she would scream abuse at him through the locked door.

Two of Joan's partners had suicided shortly after such altercations. In the first instance she screamed abusively at her violent partner and told him to 'piss off' while she was feeling safe behind a locked door. This partner threatened to kill himself and she told him to 'damn well do it then'. He rushed out of the house, drove down to the end of the street, crashed through a barrier and plummeted over a cliff to his death. Joan was grief stricken. Three years later, with yet another violent partner, the scenario was repeated. This time she locked him out of the house, and when he threatened to kill himself she said to him; 'You haven't got the guts'. He was found hanging from a tree in her garden the next morning. Again, Joan was grief stricken. She could not believe that she could be so unlucky as to have two partners who had committed suicide.

I provided critical incident stress debriefing for Joan and her children following the hanging. At our last session, Joan's ten-year-old twin daughters proudly related an incident in which they had been involved that day. They saw an overweight girl walking past them in the school grounds, and they began to bully her about her weight, calling out such names as 'fat arse' and 'pig-face'. The girl lost her temper and hit out at the twins, causing one of them to fall over and graze her knee. A teacher, who was standing some distance away, saw the twins being attacked by the girl. That girl was disciplined and also made to apologise to the twins. They were very proud of their 'win'.

Joan is engaging in risky abusive behaviours which have already influenced the death of two abusive partners. Her children are emulating this behaviour and developing skills for hurting people. If Joan's aggression continues to be ignored, the members of this family could become homicide victims in the future. Joan, along with all other women who are in violent relationships, need to understand the men with whom they live and learn more effective and safer ways of challenging their partners. It must be emphasised that in seeking to hold a woman like Joan responsible for her own aggressive and abusive behaviour, I am in no way condoning her male partners' violence, nor sidestepping their responsibility for it.

SNAPSHOT OF A VIOLENT MAN

In my group work and individual work with women, I present a profile of the perpetrator which helps women to *understand their partner's emotional and behavioural deficits* and this analysis assists them in the process of differentiation. However, violent men differ widely from one another and it is crucial to determine the dangerousness of each woman's partner through focused exploration and discussion of the abuser's behaviour. Most abusive men are reactive and spontaneous in their aggression, feeling guilty and remorseful following their violent outbursts, whereas some others will plot and scheme how to humiliate, exploit and manipulate their partners without experiencing such human emotions as sadness, regret or guilt

(Wileman and Wileman, 1997). In the latter situation, the prognosis for positive change is poor and legal interventions might be contraindicated, placing the victim in extreme danger. Jacobson and Gottman (1998) identified two subtypes of serious batterers: 'Cobras' who gain control through ferocious, cold, calculating methods of abuse and are much less emotionally dependent and 'Pit Bulls' who are highly dependent, insatiable and reactive. 'Cobras' are much more dangerous, becoming internally calmer as they become more aggressive. Their partners are strongly attached to them and are less likely to leave, partly because it would be much more dangerous to do so. It might take an extensive period of careful planning and individual support before a 'Cobra's' wife is able to establish some sort of life within her 'prison', or to leave safely.

Notwithstanding such differences, most abusive men see the world through a different lens from non-aggressive people. They acquire a perceptual bias in reading social cues, especially in ambiguous situations in which they tend to attribute hostile intent to others (Browne and Herbert, 1997). They become hypervigilant to negative cues, whilst screening out positive cues and will play down notions of their own aggressiveness. As experts in aggression, they have surprisingly little understanding of its devastating impact upon intimacy and, whilst under stress, they will demonstrate limited capacity for empathy. They will be swamped by their own suffering, and they will be incapable of perceiving their partner's pain. Such men will respond with fear and rage whenever they perceive the relationship is under threat.

Women need to understand that these men live in a very different world from them, that the use of logical argument is frequently pointless and that they will be neglected when most in need of their partner's support. These men are bewildered and confused by their own feelings, struggling with inadequacy and shame, operating within a narrow band of options when dealing with conflict. Often, they are extremely anxious and do not adapt well to changes in routine. The more vulnerable they feel, the more likely they are to resort to violence.

In the therapeutic context, the discussion needs to focus on the man's inadequacies, removing from her the burden of responsibility. When women understand their partners' major emotional and behavioural deficits, it places them in a much stronger position vis-a-vis their partner. Instead of perceiving him to be a gigantic and powerful monster, he becomes the small tantrumming child that he really is, albeit a dangerous one with an adult's capacity for inflicting destruction. Women can then utilise their cognitive skills to challenge such behaviour instead of being swamped by affect. *How to challenge safely, and when to challenge safely* are the keys to women's empowerment.

CHALLENGING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOURS SAFELY

There are a number of guidelines (Wileman, 1995; Wileman and Wileman, 1995; 1997) which women can apply to

balance power in these relationships. An adaptation of Walker's (1978) and MacDonald's (1989) Cycle of Violence is used not only to educate and sensitise women to the oppressive nature of their relationships, but to demonstrate safer times and unsafe times to initiate change (see Figure 1). A single instance will suffice to exemplify some of the principles itemised in previous publications:

One woman told her partner, at a safe time, that she was planning to visit her elderly parents in London in three months time. Immediately he became upset and intimidating. She said nothing further at the time and he calmed down shortly. A few days later she bought herself a suitcase for the trip and showed it to him. Again he became angry but she made no further comments and he settled down quickly. For the next few months, she made frequent references to the trip and occasionally brought out the suitcase and walked around the room with it. 'What the hell are you doing?' he would ask. 'I'm practising leaving', she replied and they would both start laughing. When the time arrived for her to leave for London, there were no violent incidents—a unique experience for this woman and a valuable lesson for her children.

Children who witness problem resolution 'show reductions of emotional and behavioral arousal to baseline levels' (Anderson and Cramer-Benjamin, 1999: 8) thus diluting their inclination to aggression. This is not to suggest that positive changes in the couple relationship will filter through automatically to their children. Children who have been traumatised by family violence may need opportunities to voice their fears, their sadness and traumatic experiences (Bunston, 1999).

CONCLUSION

If domestic violence personnel continue to work within the deterministic ideology of political correctness, and ignore the interactional aspects of these complex relationships, women victims are not only being denied opportunities for positive change but they may be in greater danger from serious injury and even death. Given the complexity and diversity of domestic violence relationships, multiple viewpoints are needed to broaden the range of treatment and management options available to them. 'We have much to learn from each other and innovation should not be treason' (Goldner, 1998: 267).

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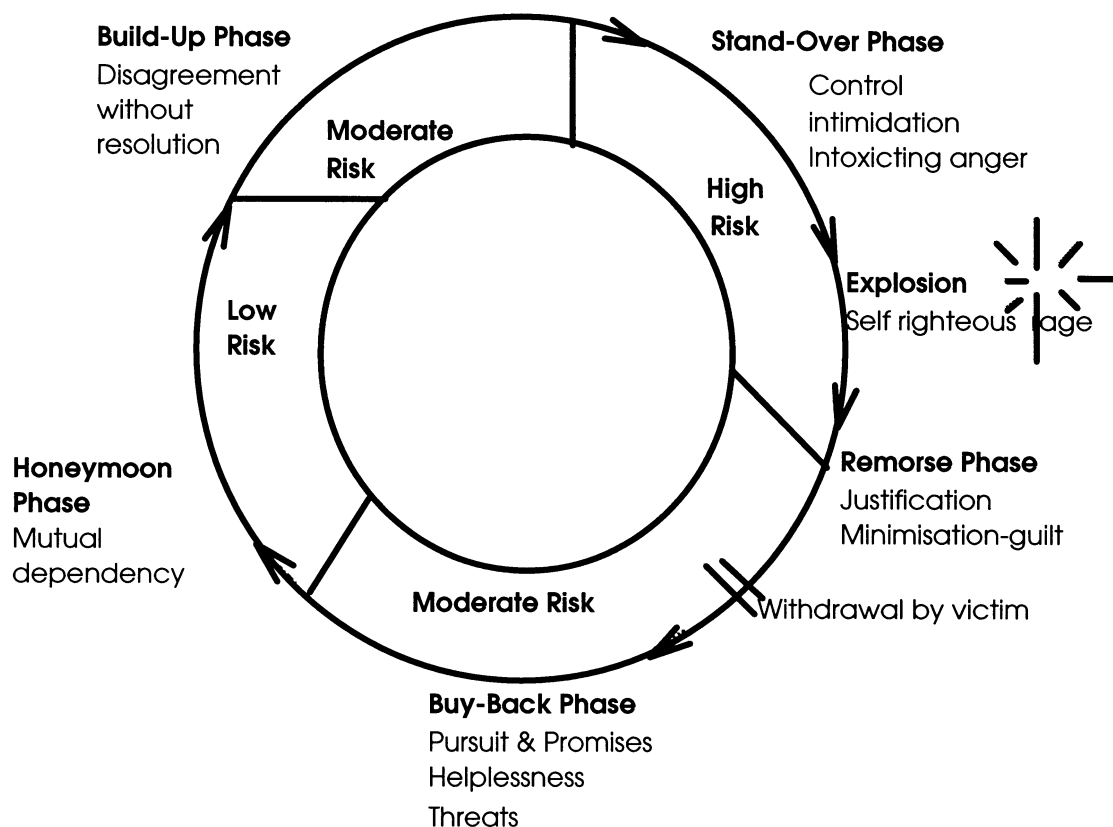


Figure 1. The Cycle of Violence

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