

Beyond the Axis of Evil: Abuse and Aggression in Intimate Partner Relationships

Alyce LaViolette, MS

2009 Annual Conference Presenter

The Therapist

January/February 2009

In 1978, I became a volunteer at the [WomenShelter](#), a refuge for battered women and their children in Long Beach, CA. The program was new and so was the idea that women could be battered by the men who loved them. In the early seventies an article about domestic violence appeared in the European edition of TIME magazine. Feminists from this country asked the editors of TIME why the article or any article about wife abuse did not appear in the U.S. edition of TIME. They were told it wasn't a problem in this country.

In the seventies, there were 10 shelters in Los Angeles and Orange Counties and all of them were turning away hundreds of women for every one taken into their programs. Our executive director Geraldine Stahly had an idea: Start a program for men who were abusive. At the end of 1978, I was hired to develop such a program and by 1979 Alternatives to Violence was born. In 1984, I took the program into private practice.

I am discussing heterosexual relationships in this article and not GLBT relationships.

Given that focus, the picture most of us have in our minds when we hear the word "batterer" usually involves a "he." "He" is the man we see on television in THE BURNING BED or almost any made-for-TV-movie on LIFETIME. "He" is the man who terrorized Julia Roberts in SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY or Jennifer Lopez in ENOUGH. "He" is one-dimensional and that dimension is evil.

The problems with that portrayal are myriad. The overwhelming majority of men that I have worked with in groups for abusive men, and those most of you will see in your private practices or agencies are not one-dimensional. Women are seen as pathological for being in these relationships, because a sane person would not be involved with someone who had no redeeming qualities. Thus, the question which continues to be the most frequently asked, "Why do they stay?"

When intimate partner violence (IPV) is seen through this narrow lens, our interventions are more limited and less effective. If we do not assess the level of abuse and control, the level of fear and the context in which it occurs, we are likely to do a disservice not only to the men but also to the women and children who love them.

Amy Holtzworth-Monroe and Gregory Stuart wrote a review article in 1994 and developed behavioral typologies of abusive men. This work, as well as early research by Elbow, Saunders, Rosenbaum, Gondolf, Hamburger, Tolman and others, exposed a range of abusive styles and behaviors. In 1995, Michael Johnson developed a continuum of violence, anchored on one end by common couple violence and on the other end by patriarchal terrorism.

Contradictory views of abusive men have been presented over the last 30 years by researchers, battered women's advocates, and batterers' group facilitators. This makes a lot of sense. Researchers collect data that is usually demographic and quantitative in nature. The focus of research generally is fairly limited in time and scope. Battered women's advocates see many of the worst cases of abuse, including physical, psychological, and sexual battering. Perpetrators look much like the media villain. And BIP (batterer intervention program) facilitators tend to see the men for one-and-a-half to two hours a week. Many programs do not get collateral data from the courts or from the victims.

Abusive men actually demonstrate a variety of behaviors and beliefs. The frequency and severity of their aggression differs as does the impact on their victims. The only common risk marker for becoming a perpetrator of intimate partner violence appears to be exposure to violence in the family-of-origin (this includes foster families.) The underlying emotions for most of these men are fear and powerlessness. Rage and anger are the reactions to these feelings.

Couples who are basically healthy do not tend to come from highly abusive families. They do not believe that aggression is a solution to problems. They experience guilt for their aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviors in the short-term, which then becomes an impetus for change. Guilt triggers healthy change rather than adding a layer of shame. Their perceptions of life and situations are not compromised by chronic fear and a belief that people, particularly intimates, have intentions to harm them.

Isolated acts of aggression can occur in relationships that are not characterized by fear, oppression and control. In fact, these relationships can be healthy. There is a balance of power between the partners, and they are friends. The act or acts of aggression do not typify the relationship. They do not occur within a dynamic of psychological, verbal, or sexual aggression. More likely, they occur within a context of stress that can be dramatic and intense but occur infrequently over time. Age can be a factor. Younger couples can act more aggressively than older couples in non-abusive relationships.

Flash back to your early relationships and the arguments that you had. They might have lasted as long as your youthful endurance would allow, and it might have seemed important to resolve everything in one sitting...even if that one sitting lasted for hours. As you got older, the nature of problems worth arguing about might have changed. Your problem-solving skills hopefully became more effective. Life experience may have created a broader context for your perceptions, and your endurance (especially for unpleasant encounters) may well have diminished.

Gender also is a factor. Women tend to believe their aggression toward male partners is not problematic or hurtful. They do not believe they frighten men by hitting them. There is empirical and anecdotal evidence for this belief. For the most part, men are not fearful of their female partner's acts of aggression and females are more fearful and insulted by aggression directed at them by male intimates (Swan and Snow, 2002, 2003; Phelan, Hamburger, Guse, Edwards, Walczak and Zozel, 2005; Hamburger and Guse, 2005.)

Male culture tends to encourage physical acting out. Young boys have usually had more than one fight by the time they reach adolescence. Most play some form of contact sports or feel they should. And, our culture, although changing, continues to be impacted by patriarchal systems. And, sexism, like all the other "isms" affects us all. As my adolescent daughter said after watching FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF, "Isms, in my opinion, are not good."

Abuse and aggression are not synonymous. Abuse is a dynamic. Aggression is an act. Aggressive behavior can occur in otherwise healthy relationships. Not all batterers look alike. The same is true of their victims. Presuming victims of abuse come from the same cloth, unhealthy families, does not reflect the reality of many survivors. Accurate assessment is essential. I believe it is time to refine our work so that our interventions are more effective for the people we impact most – our clients.

Bibliography

Gondolf, E.W. (1998). *Assessing woman battering in mental health services*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Hamburger, L.K. & Guse, C.E. (2002). *Men's and women's use of intimate partner violence in clinical samples*. *Violence against women*, 8, 1301-1331.

Hamburger, L.K. & Hastings, J.E. (1991). *Personality correlates of men who batter and non-violent men: Some continuities and discontinuities*. *Journal of family violence*, 6, 131-147.

Holtzworth-Munroe, Amy and Stuart, G.L. (1994). *Typologies of male batterers: Three subtypes and the differences among them*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 476-497.

Johnson, M. P. (1995) *Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women*. *Journal of marriage and the family*, 57, 283-294.

Phelan, M. B., Hamburger, L. K., Guse, C. E., Edwards, S., Walczak, S. and Zosel, A. (2005). *Domestic violence among male and female patients seeking emergency medical services*. *Violence and victims*, 20, 187-206.