

## Who's Abusing Who? Primary-Secondary Aggression

### Prevention Overview: Structural Change (Beth Richie's Work)

#### Limits of the "everywoman" approach

#### Interlocking Oppressions: Race, Class, Sexuality AND Gender

The three of us and our organizations work from an anti-oppression framework which insists that until structural change occurs, interpersonal violence will persist. Until institutionalized economic exploitation of poor and working class people, racism, sexism, and heterosexism give way to equitable distributions of wealth and power, there will be no true and lasting solutions to interpersonal violence. That said, we move forward with the work that we believe will not only help individuals but will also promote social change.

As we look at how colleges and universities serving primarily working class students can best address sexual violence prevention, we need to understand how the intersections of race, class, and sexuality as well as gender impact our approach. Of course, we all owe a lot to intersectionality theory first framed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The understanding of our intersecting identities is core to all political activism, so each time we dissect a social problem, this understanding needs to be voiced as central to the solution.

Due to racism and discrimination a disproportionate number of people of color in the United States are poor or working class, and pervasive patriarchal cultures target women as the primary recipient of sexual and intimate partner violence. In addition SV and IPV affect the LGBT population at least as much as they affect the heterosexual population. So identity matters, and the identity of marginalized people—working class people, people of color, lesbians, gay men, transgender people—affect how they respond to abuse and violence.

Today I am going to talk about a phenomenon originally labeled “primary/secondary aggression” and now more commonly referred to as “violence resistance.” I will also speak primarily about women of color—both lesbian and heterosexual, both trans and cis-gender—at working class colleges and universities.

Feminist scholar and activist Beth Richie outlines an important time line of the movement to end intimate partner violence. In the early sixties, Richie reminds us, activists who were working on issues of interpersonal violence attempted to deconstruct the stereotype of the typical battered woman as a poor woman of color. She and others have called this the “everywoman analysis.” *It can happen to anyone—poor, rich, middle class—any woman can be the target of abuse.* And, of course, this is important and should not be pushed aside, but in denying that poor and working class women are more likely to be abused due to the stresses of poverty, these early activists created a troubling new construct, that of the battered woman as a passive, helpless victim. And that is not what many working class women, women of color, lesbians, and transwomen and men—look like. By erasing their responses to abuse and violence which are more typically also violent, we erase their reality and end up enabling their abuse.

# The Problem with Lenore Walker's Work

## Learned Helplessness

### Battered Women's Syndrome

In 1979, psychologist Lenore Walker published a groundbreaking work *The Battered Woman*.<sup>1</sup> She sought to answer why it seemed so difficult for battered women to leave abusive relationships. She came up with two concepts: "learned helplessness,"<sup>2</sup> also known as "the battered women's syndrome" and "the cycle of violence." Although Walker included women of different ethnicities in her more than 120 case studies and 300 partial stories, her sampling was not random (xiii). And though her work moved our general understanding of intimate partner violence forward, this flaw in her research contributed to some serious problems with her theories.

While Walker and other feminists were intent on discovering why women remained trapped in abusive relationships, psychiatrists also went on that hunt. After much debate, in 1987, the DSM-III R (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) identified "Self-Defeating Personality Disorder" in an appendix of disorders needing further study.<sup>3 4</sup> The authors of this "disorder" originally cast it as a kind of masochism that allowed women to stay in abusive relationships. The feminist movement, including Walker, fought hard against that inclusion and succeeded in having it removed from the DSM-IV in 1994.

Walker's concept of "learned helplessness" or "battered women's syndrome," however, still persists as a reason many people give for women staying in abusive relationships. Walker, like Del Martin in *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Volcano Press, 1981), cited numerous reasons for victims staying trapped: money, children, lack of resources, no place to go, family pressure. All of these, and more, present major obstacles, but the idea that a woman "learns" to be helpless

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Lenore. *The Battered Woman*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> borrowed from Martin Seligman. "Depression and Learned Helplessness in Man" by Miller and Seligman in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 84 (3), 1975.

<sup>3</sup> **DEAR ABBEY:** Maybe you can suggest something to help my sister. She is married to a real heel. He is 6 feet 3 and weighs 240, and she is 5 feet and weighs 106. He has a terrible temper and frequently knocks the daylight out of her. Their marriage is really a mess. L.L.

**DEAR L.L.:** I admit your sister is no match for her heavyweight husband, but I've seen smaller gals flatten out bigger guys than this with just one look. If your sister has been letting this walrus slap her around frequently, maybe she likes it. Stay out of their family battles, Chum. When the girl who is taking it on the chin complains, I'll know she needs my suggestions.

Taken from the first "Dear Abbey" column, January 9, 1956 and published as part of Pauline Phillips's (Abbey) obituary January 17, 2013. It's troubling that *The SF Chronicle* did not mention how Abbey's views on domestic violence changed, and that she never would have responded like this in later years.

Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Pauline-Phillips-writer-Dear-Abby-dies-4204387.php#ixzz2IfpOWG00>

<sup>4</sup> It's also important to distinguish from BDSM (bondage-domination-sado-masochism) relationships and abusive relationships. In BDSM consenting adults negotiate sex play that often includes some kind of violence, such as whipping, slapping, or tying up a partner. There is always a safe word that allows either partner to stop the play at any time. Partners derive pleasure from this play; they do not enjoy being actually abused.

after repeated traumas where it appears she has no control more aptly describes the experience of a *stereotypically* middle class white, heterosexual woman—submissive and passive--than working class women, of any culture or ethnicity in the United States. Walker's non-random sampling did not adequately capture the experiences of these battered women. Nor did it address the experiences of lesbians, gay male and trans victims of intimate partner violence (IPV).

## The Problem with Edward Gondolf and Ellen Fisher's Survivor Theory

A decade after Walker's book appeared, sociologists Edward Gondolf and Ellen Fisher offered an alternative theory to answer the question of why battered women did not leave their abusers. Instead of calling battered women "passive," Gondolf and Fisher saw them as taking active roles in protecting themselves and their children, such as hiding the abuse from others to avoid retaliatory abuse from the batterer and staying in the relationship to avoid increase risk. These women assessed that there was no available outside help for them so they decide to find ways to cope with the violence and "survive" the relationship with the least amount of injury. Even Walker agreed that battered women developed survival "coping" skills.

The problem with "survivor theory" is that it is based on the assumption that the best solution would be for the victim/survivor to leave the abusive relationship, which is not always possible, especially among working class women and undocumented women. In fact, leaving a violent relationship without assured safety can actually increase the danger for the abused woman. It also only allowed battered women two categories—victim or survivor—and did not account for women who "fight back" in abusive relationships.

## Primary and Secondary Aggression ("Violent Resistance) vs. Self-Defense

Working class women, lesbians, and gay men are more likely to fight back in what has now been called "secondary aggression"<sup>5</sup> and, more recently, "violent resistance,"<sup>6</sup> when they are abused. Different than self-defense, where a victim uses force to keep from being injured or killed, violent resistance involves aggression as a kind of retaliation often delivered out of frustration rather than as life preservation. The victim has become a secondary aggressor. Prior to the late 1990s, police made "dual arrests" in cases they called "mutual combat," but in 1996 the California Penal Code Section 13701 (b) went into effect and discouraged dual arrests because law enforcement acknowledged that dual arrests treated IPV victims unfairly.<sup>7</sup> Though on the ground we would not want to condone a victim for fighting back unless her actions were in self-defense, dual arrests, which sadly still take place in working class communities throughout the country, especially communities of color, damage the lives of many survivors.

Enlightened law officers understand that it is key to be able to distinguish the primary aggressor from the secondary aggressor. The primary aggressor drives the abuse. The secondary aggressor is reacting badly to it. Essential differences include the following: who is afraid of whom? who is trying to stop the violence? who exhibits true remorse? Identification of the primary aggressor is not an easy task, but it can be accomplished through training and experience.

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<sup>5</sup> "Dual Arrests" by Melanie Crouch in *Resolve* (Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse), February 2003, Volume 5, Number 1.

<sup>6</sup> "An Exploratory Study of Women Arrested for Intimate Partner Violence: Violent Women or Violent Resistance?" by Lisa R. Muftic, Jeffrey A. Bouffard and Leana Allen Bouffard in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 2007 22:753.

<sup>7</sup> "'She hit me, too' Identifying the Primary Aggressor: A Prosecutor's Perspective" by Gael B. Strack (www.sandiegodvunit.org, retrieved from the Internet January 25, 2013)

Batterers have learned to manipulate the system by calling the police and claiming they are the victims. Unfortunately, distortion of the Gelles-Straus Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) have given “men’s movement” advocates ammunition. They employ statistics from CTS surveys without differentiating motivations between violence perpetrated by men (power and control) and violence perpetrated by women (self-defense or retaliation/frustration).

Lastly, it’s necessary to revisit Lenore Walker’s “cycle of violence” theory to explain how many victims stay trapped in abusive relationships. The “hearts and flowers” phase, which follows an “explosion” preceded by “tension building,” does explain why many victims stay on in hopes their batterers will change. But the “cycle of violence” model is not present in all abusive relationships.<sup>8</sup> In relationships where victims are not passive, they often never receive false promises or apologies. Instead they get from their batterers lines like “You’re one, too” or “I’m the victim in this relationship.”

Not all women suffer from “learned helplessness” or are trapped by “the cycle of violence.” They are fighting back badly, feeling guilty about it, and getting trapped by that guilt. Just like more obvious and seemingly more innocent victims, they bear no responsibility for the abuse they receive. They need our awareness and assistance, not our blame.

## CODA: Prevention=Social Change

I would like to end by returning to where I began—the assertion that until institutionalized economic exploitation of poor and working class people, racism, sexism, heterosexism, cis-genderism give way to equitable distributions of wealth and power, there will be no true and lasting solutions to interpersonal violence. Until we dismantle hierarchical, top-down systems that by their nature are abusive, all relationships—among couples, at the workplace, in families—will be troubled by the possibility of abuse and violence—physical, sexual, emotional, economic. Though it is essential that we continue to work with individual students, as we do our prevention work, we believe that we must turn to the relatively new movement called transformative justice, which treats root causes and promotes structural and social change while focusing on survivor needs. It values moving forward, via political education and organizing. It is promoted by community activists, many of whom are the most vulnerable survivors, such as women of color and LGBT people. It welcomes survivors as potential organizers. It values *ongoing* perpetrator accountability as well as *community* accountability. In other words it means that when we work at working class colleges and universities, we know our best strategies will come from the students we serve.

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<sup>8</sup> “Reframing Domestic Violence Law and Policy: An Anti-Essentialist Proposal” by Leigh Goodmark in *Journal of Law and Policy*, 2009, Volume 31:39.

## **Essential Definitions**

**Primary/Secondary Aggression (aka “violent resistance”)**=Physical or emotional violence without a controlling component

**Self-Defense**=physical defense in response to physical aggression that directly threatens the life of the original target

**Intimate Partner Violence**=physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse/aggression, with an ongoing controlling component, toward a partner in an intimate relationship

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