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# Violence Against Women: Looking Behind the Mask of Incarcerated Batterers

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**Abstract:** *Addressing violence against women by sharing battered prison women's written accounts with incarcerated male abusers, in a Freirian/humanities adult education program, confirmed the feminist perspective of male entitlement, female subordination in a sociohistorical context.*

## Introduction

According to a January 11, 2000 Associated Press article, "Intimate murder claims nearly 4 [American] women a day," adding that "difficult challenges remain" in resolving violence against women. In December, 1999, Johns Hopkins Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) reported that, globally, "one woman in every three has been battered, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime ... that, increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a violation of human rights" (Heise, et al, 1999). In 1995, the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, for its Declaration and Platform Action Plan, devoted an entire session to this issue. Exploring and addressing violence against women, therefore, is an enormous undertaking charged with emotion and controversy especially when confronting legal, cultural and social legacies and influences on gender roles. This study looked at the problem from a feminist perspective in the sociohistorical context of male entitlement and female subordination. The purpose was to examine the impact of a Freirian/humanities-oriented "inward journey" model (Baird, 1997) on male identity and definition formation, supported by the Newman, Lewis, Beverstock (1993) research that emphasizes the importance of the cognitive approach within humanities for socializing the inmate, for developing an awareness of self and society.

## Why Men Batter:

### Some Theoretical Perspectives

The literature on violent intimate relationships states that men are the perpetrators in 95% of the cases but adds that many men do not resort to violence when feeling provoked by a partner (Belknap, 1996; Goodyear-Smith, 1999; Heise et al, 1999; Marleau,

1999). Regarding those who do, the literature is separated into two broad categories: *excuses* and *justifications* (Belknap, 1996). The *excuses*, a deficit construct which denies responsibility, attributes battering to factors such as learned behavior, family abuse, poverty, limited education and low moral reasoning (Newman, Lewis, Beverstock, 1993). For a developmental history issue, Newberger (1999) is cited as he is a pediatrician specializing in the treatment and prevention of family violence. Some male characteristics discussed in his book which provides insights are aggression, which appears between 6 months to two years of age, and the adverse affects of a boy (more than a girl) being left unattended by a single mother. Newberger also notes that the younger a boy develops a prejudice, the more rigid it is apt to be. His book includes recommendations for parents of male children with the implication they will be addressed. Of particular interest to this study is Newberger's (1999) observation that when males grow up they tend to expect females to provide for most of their needs, and his recommendation that parents must help boys to grow up not treating females badly, indicating that the male should give back the nurturance he received from a woman.

The Newman, Lewis and Beverstock study (1993) focused on male inmates' deficiencies which include a 75% rate of illiteracy. Among the risk factors for their unsocial behavior, the researchers included Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning which were developed partly in response to prison environments. According to Kohlberg's theory, moral acts of will are informed by reason, with prisoner's reasoning found to be at the lower stages. Newman, Lewis and Beverstock (1993), therefore recommend an educational paradigm with the cognitive aspect of humanities programming to change

values, beliefs and attributes, which are unrecognized by prisoners as causative factors for their behavior.

*Justification*, alternatively, looks at the battering male through a socially constructed gender lens, in a sociohistorical context. Used by prisoners more frequently than *excuses*, *justification* is equated with entitlement, a patriarchal legacy that tolerates and glorifies aggression. This perspective draws heavily on the work of criminal justice feminist scholar Belknap (1996) since it synthesizes the findings of other researchers in the field such as Dutton, 1998; Ptacek, 1998; Walker, 1979. Men batter because it is an effective way to control women and because they feel entitled to do so. Those who batter have violent-prone personalities; they are jealous, possessive and have traditional views of women. The batterer blames the woman for initiating such behavior: she is lazy, unfaithful, prepares a poor meal, is unresponsive to his sexual needs. As king of his castle, he can treat his intimate partner any way he chooses because she is his property and, as a "child," she needs to be disciplined, to be taught a lesson. In addition to cultural and social institutions, TV and the media validate aggressive behavior; therefore, the male who batters does so because he can, because such behavior is not considered aberrant.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

Based on the success of an ongoing humanities program with incarcerated females which uses women's literature as a reflection, discussion, writing medium for promoting esteem, identity and empowerment (Baird, 1997), the prison administration extended an invitation to implement the model collaboratively with the men's counselor for sex abusers in a county jail. Instead of established authors, the "literature" link for meaning-making and understanding was writing of incarcerated women who had experienced abusive relationships – physical, psychological and emotional - and who volunteered to share their personal stories. The men in this study ranged in age from 19 to late 40's and were predominately African American. Some were court-ordered for ongoing counseling; others requested permission to receive the counseling, to learn to change.

A series of three critical humanities reading and writing sessions was conducted; each series con-

sisted of ten weekly meetings. Some sessions were held in the cell block with all inmates present (35-40 men); smaller groups (20-25 men) met in the multi-purpose room for more in-depth discussion and for group interviews. Frequently the reading and discussion of the women's stories was followed by interaction with the male counselor, especially in a situation where the inmates questioned or could not accept as accurate what a battered women had written. His role was to address such issues from a counseling perspective. To reinforce that process, he always insisted that inmates refer to their victims, predominately intimate partners, by name rather than in pejorative terms which were also explored for negative sexual implications and/or connotations. He employed role-playing techniques to reinforce a point and elaborated on both behavioral aspects and socially-constructed gender roles. Data were gathered over an eighteen month period. Data consisted of a series of formal and informal evaluations and interviews with ten volunteers who participated in the humanities-oriented program on violence against women, using the personal stories of battered female inmates as the mechanism for generating reflections, discussion and writing. The men's oral and written responses were coded and analyzed for underlying thematic constructs.

### **Findings**

Dominant themes that emerged were consistent with feminist research that labels alienation, family abuse, poverty – factors attributed to battering – as *excuses*, and entrenchment in the male role of entitlement, the *justifications* (Belknap, 1996). In a 1986 study on male spousal abuse, Williams turned to perspective transformation theory with male participants because, in part, most of the available information came from women's stories. In this study, it is precisely the battered women's stories that were the triggering mechanism for abusive incarcerated males to look behind their masks, to define themselves, and for their writing to become a personal inventory process for identity formation.

Two sets of writing resulted: one set, which became the men's publication, was thematic and often reflected the counseling component on dealing with identity issues generated by the women's writing. In this set, the men wrote about "the real me," pain and abuse. They addressed what it meant to be a man, and lost love. The unrecorded discussion that

precipitated the writing was more detailed and used more explicit language, projected emotions that ranged from hostility, denial, not “understanding her problem” to feelings of regret and shame. In the other set, each participant provided a direct response to a specific woman’s problem. In some cases the respondent assumed the role of critic, or offered advice; others addressed the abuse.

Who, then, is behind the mask? Defining “the real me” consistently began with descriptors such as loving, caring, kind, happy, liking to have fun and to make people laugh. Then, abruptly, many of the “real me’s” continued with a *justification*: they liked to play mind games with people, they took anger and stress out on people who were closest to them “because I know I can get away with it.” Others labeled themselves as monsters or animals when they weren’t happy. “We had been together for a long time and I had been controlling... started using drugs and ordering her around. I needed to know when she came home, where she was ... I was overprotective of her ... later found out she didn’t like it.” Their *excuses* for such behavior were consistent: “from the beginning I was separated from my mother and grew rebellious” or, because of parental abuse, they turned to drugs and alcohol which precipitated violence.

Inevitably, group discussion turned to definitions of manhood.

*What it means to be a man? Well, to me, [it] always meant to be in control over everything, not to be scared of nothing and never show your feelings or what we would call weakside because if we did we think it’s a chump move or something so I always wanted to be in control and never let anyone control me and never showed my feelings.*

The other frequently cited definition of what it meant to be a man focused on fatherhood,

*she looked like a red apple to be picked. We were real close ... she would have had her first baby to me but we were about 17 years old. Her mom got her an abortion ... I do miss her ... she would have been my first to have my baby.*

Other men reflected on lost loves. For one man it was his dog. Several referred to mothers, some to

their fathers. Another wrote, “I fell in love with the streets ... gave myself to drugs and street life.”

The second set of writings involved selecting one of the women’s stories and responding to it directly. As examples, “She” wrote:

*Dad, when you started abusing me, you not only hurt me, but you scarred me as well. I can’t talk to you on my own ... ‘cuz I feel like if I say the wrong thing to you when it’s just us, you will backhand me.*

One “He” responded:

*Every person does things in their own way. I’m sure if you asked your father he would say he loved you ... talk to him ... you also have to do things for yourself, don’t expect your father to be with you every step of the way.*

Another “He” was reminded of his own father, of experiences that still affect him today ... “I learned he emulated things done to him by his father who I’m named after.”

A “She” wrote:

*I remember when I was at my cousins ... that I was rape on her birthday ... couldn’t get away ... there were four of them ... so they all rape me and then ran a pitch fork under my neck.*

To which a “He” wrote:

*Well “sweetheart” the best thing to do is talk about it, to hold it in is too painful and you possibly could go crazy. Oh yes, please don’t hold a grudge against your cousin ... It would bring more stress on plus it wasn’t her fault.*

One of the inmates offered an overview of all of the stories that were shared.

*I didn’t have a father in my life, my mother did it all by herself and she has made me strong ... most of what I read was inspiring. Others, well, all I can say is that some of you need to consult professional help to deal with some of the issues that plagued you. But, all in all, they were very entertaining and upbeat ... Keep up the good*

*work ... knowing your problem is finding your solution.*

Analyzing the writing and discussion, according to Newberger's stages of male development (1999), the men's *excuses* for their behavior could have stemmed from un-addressed childhood hostility; prejudices, mainly towards females; inattention from a single female parent and alienation from a father. The men in this study, however, were not prone to *excuse* their behavior or to blame their situations to explain violence; rather, they blamed the victim. The men felt *justified* to do so because of their entrenched perceptions of women as "hos". Theirs were socially-constructed gender definitions reinforced by their father's behavior and attitudes. Those who admitted to wanting to change found it both difficult and threatening in the prison culture and on the outside. To them, being men meant being a non-trusting risk-taker, being in control in all situations and being entitled to wear the mask of violence.

Fortunately, the county jail provides ongoing counseling for sex abusers because for many of these men the doors have been revolving ones with their records including other infractions in addition to abusing women. The counselor frequently commented favorably on the humanities model because it generated discussion during and between sessions. The men indicated they liked the process because it was a change from "traditional" counseling; it was as though they were really communicating with women they may have known. The following are examples of their written evaluations.

One commented:

*Well I haven't been in to long but so far it has helped relieve stress and I'm starting to learn how to talk more about what's bothering me and I'm starting to own up to my wrong doings. It's not easy ... I really want to learn how to relieve my anger in a positive manor instead of resorting to violence all the time.*

Another acknowledged that, "I will get a better understanding of what abusive behavior is and what some of the characteristics are."

and

*Without the means and confronting situations*

*(negative as well as positive) off/from this group and the members/participants of or in it, I would never be compelled nor forced to look at my problems as such: PROBLEMS ... I get "HELP" ... from this group.*

### Conclusion

Though confined to a specific and limited male population, the result of this study on violence against women supports the patriarchal dependency model that sanctions male violence and female submissiveness. Feminist scholars are consistent in their advocacy for restructuring women's role, for "building a political, economic and social system equitable to women" (Armon & Dawson, 1997; Belknap, 1996 and a February 19, 2000 consult with Dr. Dupont-Morales, a criminal justice professor). The recent Hopkin's report considers the issue one of such magnitude that it requires long-term commitment and strategies from all parts of society to empower women, reach out to men, as in this study, to "change beliefs and attitudes that permit abusive behaviors" (Heise et al, 1999). Utilizing a Freirian/humanities format within adult education was a start. There is an implied need for more, continuing community-based involvement, and the need for more extensive studies on violence. Expanding the topic from "who batters and why," the global implication, the "Right Quest/ion" for adult education needs to be imbedded in the roots of human rights and social justice. Our vision and quest for the millennium begs building on the Freirian foundation, examining the power and control issues at all levels that engender violence.

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