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Learning to change: Identifying Elements of Transformation in Formerly Abusive Men

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Abstract: *This qualitative study examines the content from interviews with 10 formerly abusive men who self-identify as having changed their perspectives about abuse toward their partners. The study was conducted to uncover the causes for their change, and to show how this change is explained and supported by transformative learning theories.*

The purpose of this study is to examine how formerly abusive men learn to become non-abusive, and to look at the ideological changes in their understanding of abuse, women, and the tenets of patriarchy that have resulted in the cessation of their abusive behaviors. Programs aimed at educating men about abuse against women are proliferating in the United States and throughout the world. Some look at the problem of abuse toward women as a value-laden construct of the culture (McKeown, 1997; Kauffman, 2000). Increasingly, more programs utilize treatment methods that explore the problems of a patriarchal society and men's privileged position within that society to deal with this catastrophic injury against women and against society (Mills, 2000; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Hearn, 1998). These programs employ a pro-feminist point of view and offer the most promising framework for true ideological change. Support for equality for women and a deconstruction of patriarchy as a means of the oppression of women is the focus of pro-feminist thought.

Learning within the context of abuse is problematic to say the least. The educational concepts that may serve to ground this learning must encompass a process that allows for the deconstruction of old paradigms and the reconstruction of modes of thinking that encourage a sense of respect for the self and others along with a belief in equality among people that is not affected by gender. Theories of adult education that view learning as transformative are constructionist in nature and provide a framework that supports ideological change. (Boyd & Meyers 1988; Brookfield, 1990, 2000; Cranton, 1997; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1991, 2000). In long held meanings about gender issues and abuse, it can move the learner toward a perspective of social justice and equality

Supportive Literature

Since the 1970s many abuse intervention programs have adopted an approach that focuses on the issues of power and control as the primary constructs responsible for domestic abuse against women. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project – the Duluth Model is a program for treatment developed by Pence and Paymar (1982) in the early 1980s that expanded on these early programs and incorporated a community based framework that provides a construct for victim safety, public awareness and prevention, along with batterer treatment programs that emphasize responsibility and accountability for abusive men. Group counseling sessions within these programs acknowledge the problems produced by a patriarchal society. The issues of domination and male control are challenged and men are confronted with the problems caused by their patriarchal belief systems (Shephard & Pence, 1999).

The psychological literature provides theoretical support for change within the realm of addictive behaviors that serves as a model for cessation of abusive behaviors. Among others, the

transtheoretical model of change developed by Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross (1992), consists of five stages of change. This model describes a process that has been applied to change in violent men who have ceased their violent behaviors. Also, Stefanakis (1998) found that the transtheoretical model of change was descriptive of the change process that occurred in his study in which formerly violent men related their stories of identity transformation. He identified two factors associated with a change as relevant. These are the presence of negative sanctions, both official and social sanctions, and helping relationships that encouraged accountability and change. Stefanakis' (1998) work supports the use of group intervention with abusive men where helping relationships can be formed and new meanings and frames of reference can be constructed that facilitate change.

The process of relationship formation that promotes change can be found within the theoretical constructs of learning particularly with the field of adult education. Transformative learning theories represent these constructs. The application of transformative learning theories begins with Mezirow (1991), who views transformative learning in the context of two paths capable of leading toward change. These paths involve learning through the tasks of problem-solving solutions to specific problems or "instrumental" learning; and cultivating an understanding of the meaning expressed by others in regard to their values, feelings and perceptions about these problems, or "communicative" learning. The use of critical reflection and personal analysis to foster this understanding results in a transformative learning experience that allows the individual to alter their perspective and change the personal meanings they associate with social and psychological constructs. Mezirow's concepts of perspective transformation, as Taylor (1998), points out, are conceived in individual and personal change. It examines the processes of self-examination, self-reflection and self-change with the understanding that, because individuals do not exist in a vacuum, personal change will affect and be affected by the individual's social environment.

Kegan (2000), in his contribution to Mezirow's most recent text, *Learning as Transformation,* speaks of the need to broaden the concept of transformational learning to include the life span and to concentrate succinctly in the epistemological change rather than behavioral change. Additionally, he advises adult educators to acknowledge the present epistemologies of their students in order to foster epistemological transformation. Kegan's thoughts speak particularly to the focus of this study in that my goal was to engage formerly violent men in critical examination of the epistemological paradigm shifts that fostered a behavioral change toward non-violence.

In relation to the constructs of transformative learning theory I maintained a feminist perspective toward the central issues of this study. Specifically, a feminist post-structuralist view that includes an examination of patriarchy and the issues of power and control over women as exhibited by men along with how these social processes inform the social identity of women (Hersford & Kozol, 2001). This feminist focus necessitated the use of multiple viewpoints within the transformative learning research that move beyond Mezirow's basic tenets to embrace more inclusive perspectives, especially those that address the paradigms of power, positionality and feminine learning viewpoints. The encompassing ideas embedded in the issues of domestic abuse, and the reasons for men's abuse of women, are the tenets of patriarchy and its premise of inequality, imbalance of power and silencing of women's voices. Belenky & Stanton (2000), add dimension to transformative learning theory by recognizing those who have been silenced and have not experienced the kinds of reflective discourse that are so central to transformative processes. Belenky & Stanton warn that the consequence of ignoring these people is failure in

the search for justice to which transformative learning ascribes. The need to foster reflection and integration into full society of people engaged in asymmetrical relationships, be they women or men, is key in tackling the pervasive issues of domestic violence.

Research Design

This study utilized an interpretative, qualitative method that identified causes for and processes of change, through the recounting of participant histories and the reporting of critical incidents and reasons that served to initiate an ideological and behavioral change in formerly violent men. A purposeful sampling selection process was used. I interviewed ten men who had been identified as meeting my study criteria by sources within several county and private organizations in southeastern and central Pennsylvania and Delaware. The study criteria included a history of abuse toward their female partner, a self-reported ideological change in their view of women and abuse, and sustained non-abusive behavior toward women for a period of at least one year. Questions that were addressed included: What are the triggers for change in men who have ceased their abuse toward their female partners? What insights do the perspectives of formerly abusive men who have maintained their change for a prolonged period provide into the mechanisms of change?; and Are transformative learning theories an appropriate framework for ideological change in abusive men?

Findings

Ten interviews were conducted over a six-month period. The participants were referred through reliable sources that included a board member from a domestic violence shelter and directors of interventions programs for men.   The group was diverse in age, educational level, profession and relationship status.

The findings produced by this study are organized into two primary categories of information as self-reported by the ten study participants. These are: 1) Abuse as an Ideology, which includes the abuse experienced as victims and perpetrated as abusers; and 2) An Ideological Change from Abuse, which examines the context, provocation and mechanism for ideological change. Within these categories several sub-categories exist that provide a complex depiction of abuse, both experienced and committed, in the lives of the participants and the impetus and process of ideological change that allowed these men to end their abusive behaviors.

The childhood experiences of these participants were strikingly similar in that all of the participants witnessed or were victims of physical and/or emotional abuse from their parents – primarily their fathers. Another finding of note was that all the participants grew up in intact families where both a mother and father were present at least until the age of twelve.
Interestingly, some of the participants saw their mothers, who often were also victims of abuse, as "instigators" of abuse toward their children in telling their fathers about actions that precipitated punishments in the form of beatings. There was no recollection of a mother's attempt to defend or take action to protect their children from their fathers.

Incidents that preceded change were similar among participants and included episodes of intense violence toward their partner, being confronted by their abuse in varied ways, an overt action (such as leaving) on the part of the partner, and feeling of loss and aloneness as result of their behaviors. Mechanisms for change employed included engaging in critical reflection of their previously held beliefs, participation in an abuse prevention program and finding support and acceptance from someone who assisted them in their change process. This person was primarily found among the staff of the abuse intervention program. Finally, encounters with spiritual and religious experiences were reported as significantly affecting change in one

participant. All incidents were not experienced by all participants but all identified at least one of the above.

There was also similarity in behavioral changes in that the majority were able to articulate a complete acceptance of responsibility for their actions, a greater ability to reflect on, recognize and understand their own feelings, and a sense of awakening or of being more open to others than previously felt. Their remarks included awareness of the depth of hurt and pain they had caused and an admission that they would not have been willing to endure the same had the situation been reversed.

Some of the discoveries of information found have been disturbing. They invoke feelings of both empathy and aversion as they reveal the experiences of men who treated their loved ones, including partners and children, with anger, rage, meanness and extreme disrespect. The findings show that they believed they had the right to do this in large part because, as men, it was an expectation of their role and for most, because it had been done to them. The majority didn't view their behaviors as wrong until an incident or series of incidents forced them to see that they could not continue to behave in their accustomed way. These incidents were often painful and costly to themselves and also to their victims. Most have paid deeply for the actions they have taken against their partners and children but this does not compare to the pain they inflicted. In varying degrees these men have shown that they understand the pain they have caused and are working hard to amend the damage that has resulted to the lives of their loved ones.

Conclusions

A distinct aspect of this study is that it focuses on men's self-reported perceptions of the critical incidents that initiated their individual change. It asked men to identify what was the most meaningful element in their experiences that precipitated and caused a change in their ideology to occur. In doing so this study has produced a rich and personal account of the inner lives of the study participants. In this way it extends previous research utilizing the stories of men who have been violent and desisted in their violence toward their partners (Stefanakis, 1998), beyond the realm of psychological theories of explanation for behavior, and applies transformative learning theories to the process of change. This provides an educational base for enhancement of abuse intervention program development.

The similarities and differences that emerged from the analysis of the narratives of the participants and the findings of the study include four areas of thought. These included: 1) the histories of the participants provide the context for understanding their abuse. The participants came from families where child abuse and wife abuse were inherent. The fathers were abusive, especially to the children, and the mothers were passive in their tolerance of the abuse against their children. 2) Each participant was able to identify a critical incident or incidents that initiated an understanding that change was needed. These incidents were recognized by the men as turning points in their identification of the need for some action to be taken, although at that point the direction was not clear. As stated by one participant about his need to change, "How? I didn't know how?" (Bill). 3) Change was accomplished through a process that for most included attendance at an abuse intervention program, and the encouragement and support of another person who confronted the participant about their abuse and who offered support through the change process. 4) The process produced changes in beliefs that translated into actions. These actions served to improve the lives of the participants and their partners.

The changes resulted in a clear articulation of beliefs about gender equality and respect for women, that relationships should be equal partnerships, the acceptance of themselves as abusers, the recognition of the emotional, psychological and physical aspects of abuse, and the satisfaction of seeing themselves as better people than they had been before. Additionally, there was improved communication in their relationships, better connections with their children, a few stopped drinking alcohol and several became active in working with their intervention program to help other men.

In working within this framework produced by the findings it becomes evident that transformative learning theories can be applied to the learning processes experienced by these men. The process of change for these men included the development of a climate for change in which critical incidents occurred that initiated an understanding of the need to change. These changes were then based on critical reflection of past experiences of abuse as victims, witnesses and perpetrators. They relied on a social interaction and support system, primarily an abuse intervention program, that was constructivist in nature and contingent on the development of new meanings about their spouses, their previously held beliefs and about the social expectations related to gender. Finally, they incorporated these new meanings into their belief systems and demonstrated these beliefs through changed actions within their relationships. The findings of this study are quite significant in that clear similarities were found in the incidents that precipitated change, the behavioral changes that occurred and the beliefs system changes that were identified. These striking agreements among participants constitute several areas that may be addressed by abuse intervention programs. Beyond the overriding priority of acceptance of responsibility for their actions; a concentration on promoting recognition of feelings particularly from childhood and past experiences that are rooted in parental abuse, and an opportunity for men to connect on a deep level with another person where a trusting relationship can develop, are key factors in producing lasting ideological change. The desires of these men to help others change is also indicative of the importance of this needed connection to another in a supportive relationship. Elements of a pro-feminist perspective were evident in a majority of the men interviewed. This supported their understanding of the problems of domestic abuse on a societal level.

This research indicates that the review of personal histories, especially those ideas and beliefs gained in childhood is an important element of transformative learning processes. These findings support the use of transformative learning theories that describe the process of change as becoming aware of feelings and understandings that are based on our experiences, and a willingness to change our assumptions to allow for an increased openness and acceptance of others. This leads to substantive change in ideological perspectives and in behavior. (Boyd & Meyers 1988; Brookfield, 1990, 2000; Cranton, 1997; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

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