

Resources for Contextually Addressing Women's Use of Force

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Cell Phone: (973) 493-5821

Website-Based Resources:

RENEW Program Website, includes audioconferences, curricula, and articles. www.csswashtenaw.org/renew

When *She* Hits Him: Why Gender & Context Matter, November 2010 national conference addressing women's use of force. Conference materials and speeches available for download.

<http://www.biscmi.org/wshh/>

Community-Based Curricula/Guides:

Turning Points: A Nonviolence Curriculum for women who use violence against their partners. For more information go to: <http://dvturningpoints.com/products>

Vista Curriculum, a 20-session curriculum (available for free download) framing intervention and support services for women who use force in their intimate relationships. <http://www.jbws.org/publications.html>

Prison-Based Curriculum:

Meridians for Incarcerated Women, a 20-session curriculum providing incarcerated women an opportunity to reflect upon their pasts as they shape their futures. www.csswashtenaw.org/renew

Listserv Membership:

W-Catch22 provides local, national, and international resource sharing opportunities for professionals involved in the lives of women who have used force in their intimate relationships. Contact listserv moderator, Lisa Young Larance, for membership information: lylarance@gmail.com

Language and Conceptual Framework for Addressing Women's Use of Force

http://www.odvn.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30&Itemid=276

http://www.odvn.org/images/stories/WWUF_Guidelines_June_20111.pdf

http://www.odvn.org/images/stories/WWUF_LanguageConcept_Final.pdf

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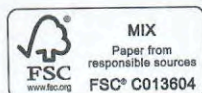
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Emergent Research and Practice Trends in Contextually Addressing the Complexity of Women's Use of Force

Lisa Y. Larance and Susan L. Miller¹

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research about, and community-based programmatic responses to, battered² women's use of force in their intimate heterosexual relationships³. By highlighting emerging issues, we hope to stimulate discussion and a more fully informed response to the complexity introduced by criminalizing women's responses to violence and abuse in their intimate relationships. Three decades ago, efforts to efficaciously and compassionately address the needs of battered women were in their infancy. A grassroots coalition comprised of survivors, advocates, attorneys, and practitioners elevated the personal experiences of battered women to an issue of social prominence, and challenged the system's trivialization and tolerance of violence and abuse occurring between intimate partners and former partners. Changes in the ways that the criminal legal system⁴ (CLS) responded to intimate violence are directly attributed to these early efforts of battered women's advocates and members of the feminist movement; perhaps the most significant change is the manner in which police handle intimate partner violence (IPV) calls, by implementing mandatory (or presumptive) arrest policies requiring

arrest if probable cause exists that demonstrates that an act of violence occurred. This *Gemeinschaft*—advocating arrest for “non-stranger” crime—facilitated research promoting the deterrence aspects of pro- or mandatory arrest policies (Sherman, 1992; Sherman & Berk, 1984). Following the widely publicized findings that arrest deters future IPV, many jurisdictions quickly enacted mandatory, preferred, or pro-arrest statutes.

IPV arrest policies are lauded for increasing abused women’s protection and encouraging offender accountability. They do so by removing police discretion at the time of arrest. When enforced properly, the changes ensure an appropriate arrest is made, hopefully serve as a deterrent to future violence, and show the state is no longer tolerant of IPV. At the same time, however, mandatory arrest policies may in some instances do more harm than good. Adverse consequences result because the CLS rests on an incident-driven model, void of context, which removes women’s decision-making power. Furthermore, police officers typically do not consider the full context of the incident, even if they are legally required to do so (Finn & Bettis, 2006). As a result, police officers continue to make inappropriate arrests of victims, despite extensive training. This has been attributed to patriarchal police force culture, organized along paramilitary contours, in addition to a misinformed reliance on the myth of mutual combat (O’Dell, 2007).

When police fail to consider the full context of the presenting abusive situation, victim arrests naturally occur, given the disproportionate representation of female victims and male offenders (Black et al., 2011). Of particular concern is the growing evidence of women’s increased arrests for IPV when they are either the sole offender or arrested as part of a dual arrest (Miller, 2005; Osthoff, 2002; Rajan & McCloskey, 2007). Furthermore, women are often wrongly arrested for defending themselves. Additionally, when police arrive at the scene of the incident, abusive male partners often manipulate the situation to their own advantage (Larance & Rousson, 2016; Miller, 2005; Muftic et al., 2007; Osthoff, 2002; Roy, 2012). For example, in Pollack et al.’s (2005) research, 10 of the 19 women arrested for using force against a partner “reported that their male partner used his knowledge of the criminal justice system (including how mandatory charge policies work) to portray her as the primary aggressor and have her arrested and charged” (p. 11). Pollack et al.’s (2005) findings are similar to those of Dichter (2013, 2015), Larance and Rousson (2016), Miller (2005), and Roy (2012). Similarly, women’s use of force is increasingly used

against them in custody and/or visitation disputes, a phenomenon often exacerbated by men's rights groups (see Dragiewicz, 2011).

"Paper abuse" is an additional consideration regarding abusive men manipulating the system against women (Dragiewicz, 2011; Miller & Smolter, 2011). Paper abuse incorporates routine acts used by batterers against their former partners to continue victimization and includes a range of behaviors such as filing frivolous lawsuits, making false reports of child abuse, and taking other legal actions as a means of exerting power, forcing contact, and financially burdening their ex-partners. In addition, some jurisdictions charge mothers of minor children with "failure to protect" if the children are exposed to IPV (Kantor & Little, 2003).

A thorough understanding of why women use force is a critical aspect of placing the violence in context, undertaking informed research, and implementing effective programming. Swan et al.'s (2012) work addresses the need for more thorough investigation into women's aggression. They argue that a gendered analysis accurately portrays women's experiences of IPV, pointing out that women's aggression is distinctly different from women's victimization. The work of Swan et al. (2012) and Swan and Snow (2002) concluded that, in comparison with men who perpetrate IPV, women are more likely to be motivated by self-defense and fear. Hamberger and Guse (2002) found that women's motivation for using violence against an intimate partner is dramatically different from men's; men use IPV as a means of control whereas women do so in self-defense (Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Saunders, 2002).

Women have stated a range of motives for using force (Caldwell et al., 2009; Dasgupta, 1999, 2002, 2007; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Hamberger et al., 1997; Larance, 2006, 2007, 2012; Larance & Miller, forthcoming; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Swan et al., 2008; Weston et al., 2007). Their reasons include, but are not limited to, physically defending themselves; defending who they are as individuals; "turning the tables" of power and control; protecting their children; retaliating for past relationship wrongs; demanding attention; feeling jealous; expressing anger; regaining lost respect; using his abusive actions against him; and attempting to escape abuse while asserting their dignity. This understanding explains the complex power and control dynamics that contribute to the difficulty of accurately assessing the situation. Such an explanation is necessary for more thorough research and effective intervention.

It is clear that police often circumvent arrest policies. Some police officers refuse to make arrests even when mandatory arrest policies

exist (Frye et al., 2007), while others rely upon their own beliefs about what behavior is “normative” for offenders and victims and make arrests guided by their own positions (Miller, 2005; O’Dell, 2007; Stalans & Finn, 1995). Overall, studies reveal that police officers do not always find abused women credible, and may still blame them for the violence (DeJong et al., 2008; Ferraro & Pope, 1993; Goodmark, 2008; Stalans & Finn, 2006). Thus, as Ritmeester and Pence (1992) suggest, CLS agents contribute to women’s criminalization through the way in which they process and categorize women’s experiences.

The CLS’s response blurs the boundaries between victims and offenders. It also highlights the CLS’s lack of capacity for taking multiple factors into account. There is hope, however, given examples from a coordinated community response in Washtenaw County, MI (Gondolf, 2015; Larance & Rousson, 2016), and a growing informed awareness of the problem among advocates, CLS staff, and academics, who actively challenge misleading arrest statistics, the lack of appropriate programming, and entrenched structural and gender inequalities, which all contribute to the complexity of this issue (Larance & Miller, 2015).

Perspectives of criminal justice professionals

Although police officers act as the gatekeepers to the CLS, other criminal legal and social service professionals struggle with how best to respond to women’s use of force in intimate relationships. Research reflecting this ambiguity reveals a different accounting, such as those described in Miller’s (2005) analysis of police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and other CLS and social service professionals who dismiss the idea of mutual combatants; reveal an understanding of power and control dynamics and men’s primary power; attribute women’s increased IPV arrests to changes in policy; believe male offenders manipulate women and the CLS; and find that misguided police motivation exacerbates the problem. The court process in general is often mysterious for women, because they are baffled by how their efforts to protect themselves and their children could possibly result in arrest or any punitive measures from a system founded upon the philosophy of seeking justice. Current strategies are underway to address how alienating the legal/court process can be for women survivors of domestic violence who have used force, such as instituting primary aggressor guidelines so police and prosecutors can more effectively distinguish between victims and offenders. It is still the case that

when police cannot determine the primary aggressor, they arrest one or both parties and let the courts figure out the end result (Bohmer et al., 2002; Miller 2005). The Center for Court Innovation (CCI), which seeks to aid victims by improving public trust in justice, is on the cutting edge of ameliorating this situation through support of domestic violence specialty courts in the US. By facilitating open houses around the nation—as well as providing other resources, including webinars (CCI, 2013)—the CCI promotes best practices geared toward more equitable courtroom treatment.

The focus on early and more enhanced police training stems from the research of O'Dell (2007) and Finn and Bettis (2006), which found that police officers are neither trained nor prepared to identify primary aggressors. In a review of 128 domestic violence cases over 6 years, Hester (2012) found that women identified by police as “perpetrators” rarely exerted the power and control inherent in battering tactics. With the decontextualized approach, women in Hester’s sample were three times as likely as their male partners to be arrested. Hester (2012) also emphasized that women who were heavy drinkers or much younger than their male partners were more likely to be arrested. She notes that police understanding of gendered dynamics is central to their ability to accurately identify the primary aggressor. This does not abnegate women’s responsibility for retaliatory violence, but by contextualizing such behavior, it can be effectively dealt with while increasing women’s safety.

How police evaluate, blame, and interpret behavior affects arrest patterns as well. For instance, Leisenring (2011) looked at women’s understanding of their interactions with police, and suggested that women’s self-presentation fails to convince officers that they are victims; consequently, they are arrested. Similarly, some women are unable to convince officers that they were *not* victims—but the officers still arrested their partners (Leisenring, 2011, p. 358). This perpetuates the practice of implicit bias—using images or assumptions of what a “good” victim looks and acts like to understand behavior or assess presentation. It is common for a woman to hear from police officers that she did not fit the profile of a “good” victim because she called first for police help but then failed to leave the man. From the officer’s point of view, a “good” victim would have left. Therefore, she was arrested.

Other women who were arrested openly admitted their violent acts to police for self-defense or frustration reasons. Police then arrested them for “damaging property.” Still other women believed their emotional state—for example, crying and visibly upset—harmed their credibility, causing police to take their claims less seriously. Leisenring’s

findings confirm Miller's (2001, 2005) earlier research, which revealed women's partners/ex-partners used the women's emotions as evidence that they were crazy, thereby diminishing the women's credibility. Who was able to proactively define the situation—such as who called 911 first—also influenced who the police believed. Again, this supports Miller's (2001, p. 1354) research that abusers have learned how to manipulate the system. It also exemplifies how cases are often assessed differently by police officers, could explain why stereotypes of “normative” characterizations of victims still influence arrest decisions (DeJong et al., 2008; Dichter, 2013), and shows that officers interpret mandatory arrest policies differently (Cramer et al. 2003; O'Dell, 2007).

Perceptions of women who have used force

The lay public and the CLS continue to rely on visual cues that highlight the physicality of IPV, such as visible bruises or broken bones. Many researchers, however, maintain that coercive control is more likely part and parcel of abuse, and this tactic is often gendered, as well as invisible to those outside the relationship (Anderson, 2009; Brush, 2009; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006; Stark, 2007). Dichter (2013) mentions how coercive control fits into victims' use of force in response to forms of IPV “that are not as clearly identifiable to outsiders but may be as damaging as, or more damaging than, physical attacks; examples include isolating the victim from social supports, controlling the victim's activities and access to resources, and using verbal threats and nonphysical forms of intimidation” (p. 83; see also Smith et al., 1999). The collateral damage of arresting women who use force includes implications for how a criminal record affects employment; housing; financial aid; voting rights; immigration status; the right to bear arms; child custody; and accrued costs for court-ordered intervention/treatment, legal counsel, and childcare—not to mention an often greater use of violent retaliation from the true abuser. Dichter's (2013) study provides examples of monetary expenses incurred by women as a result of arrest, in addition to other costs, such as trouble finding employment and/or losing a job. Women also described how arrests led to clinical depression, suicide attempts, substance abuse, financial problems, loss of employment, and parenting challenges.

Emerging trends in research

This section presents an overview of emerging trends identified by advocates and researchers.

The symmetry question

Despite the abundant research resoundingly demonstrating that women's use of force is typically not equivalent to men's battering, critics of contextually based research and scholars who conduct quantitative surveys or use large samples that measure IPV using acontextual checklists (that is, "If you ever do X, check yes or no") continue to assert that violence is symmetrical and that there are scant gender-based differences in its use (Straus, 1995, 2009). Context is crucial in unpacking motivations and mechanisms of abuse; failure to consider the panoply of research that reveals the nuanced and complicated nature of women's use of force means the presentation of summed up checklists is inaccurate and misleading. While we believe that gaining insight through research is an important enterprise in knowledge building, if the tenets it rests on are unsteady or collapsing, the message is both disingenuous and dangerous.

We echo the admonishment in Johnson et al.'s (2014) recent article: quantitative researchers must think about problems inherent in using large general survey data to analyze IPV perpetration, and endeavor to uncover gender differences in the use of force. Johnson et al. (2014) detail a new operationalization of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence using ex-spouse data from the National Violence Against Women Survey, demonstrating that it is possible to use quantitative survey data to expose gender asymmetry. Their work not only confirms differences between intimate terrorism and situational couple violence, but also establishes that "intimate terrorism is much more likely to be perpetrated by men, it involves more frequent and more injurious violence, and it has debilitating psychological consequences for victims" (Johnson et al., 2014, pp. 202–203).

Similarly, Gondolf's (2012) investigation into the differences between the violence of men enrolled in batterer intervention programs (BIPs) and the violence of their female partners refutes claims that BIP participants and their partners are primarily engaged in "mutual violence." Gondolf's work illustrates that women's reports of using force against their partners largely stop when their male partners reduce their abuse and violence, and in relationships with continuing

severe violence, the women's behavior is best characterized as "violent resistance" rather than a "both victim" dyad (Gondolf, 2014). Straus (2014), however, dismisses these findings by reinterpreting Gondolf's (2014) data and calling for an emphasis on programming for female partners, asserting that only then will violence by women be reduced.

Culture and diversity

Although broad observations are made about women's use of force, recent work acknowledges the differential impact and response of women hailing from varied backgrounds and circumstances. This acknowledgment is especially important given the CLS's tendency to overcriminalize poor women of color (Potter, 2008; Richie, 1995, 2012; Sokoloff, 2005; West, 2002, 2012). Other women are also disenfranchised based on their multiple identities: "race"/ethnicity, immigration status (Dasgupta, 2002; Roy, 2012), poverty, sexuality, gender identity, disability (Ballan & Freyer, 2012), and/or age (Collins, 2015).

There is a related concern that some women from these groups would avoid approaching the police as a resource for help, which could increase the likelihood that an individual will use violence as a means of self-protection (Miller, 2005). For instance, West (2007) looks at Black women—whom she calls "victim-defendants"—and develops the concept of bidirectional asymmetric violence. She argues that Black women use aggression to protect themselves and/or their children or in retaliation against their abusers. Black women are therefore disproportionately labeled as mutual combatants and/or arrested, but the possibility of arrest for Black women increases in jurisdictions with mandatory arrest policies (see also Melton & Belknap, 2003; Simpson et al., 2006). Swan and Snow's (2002) work with a sample of predominately Black low-income women (108) found that, although women and men committed equivalent levels of verbal abuse and women more moderate physical violence (throwing objects, pushing, and shoving), men committed significantly more severe physical violence (choking, sexual aggression, and coercive control) and were better able to control the women's behavior. The findings of West (2007), and other scholars, suggest that Black women are overrepresented in arrests due to:

the association among poverty, residence in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and Black female-perpetrated

IPV. Low-income urban areas are often characterized by racial segregation, social isolation, rampant unemployment, and community violence, including high rates of non-IPV homicide. In these communities, the appearance of physical or emotional weakness can be dangerous, making at least the show of violence essential for survival. When violence is routinely modeled for Black women (and men) as a way of achieving one's goals, as a means of self-protection, or as a conflict resolution strategy, this aggressive behavior can easily spill over into intimate relationships. (West, 2007, p. 100; see also Benson & Fox, 2004; Websdale, 2001)

Coinciding with these findings, after pro-arrest legislation was expanded in Maryland, arrests of women increased for all groups but more drastically for Black women (25.3% and 38% respectively, before and after the policy) (Simpson et al., 2006).

Focusing on the intersectional nature of women's experiences is critical: "Strategies based on the experiences of women who do not share the same class and race backgrounds will be of limited utility for those whose lives are shaped by a different set of obstacles" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 86). It is necessary to move beyond regarding "race," class, and gender as individual identity characteristics; instead, by including the standpoints of diverse women, these issues should be seen as interlocking structures that interact with other forms of inequality and oppression—such as racism, ethnocentrism, class privilege, and heterosexism—to constrain and/or shape women's lives and choices (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Larance, 2012; Smith, 1987). Diversity raises issues of "culture"—how to account for different cultures defining IPV differently—without allocating blame to an immigrant's culture, for example, or excusing/tolerating cultural practices in ways that justify batterers who use cultural defenses. We need a sociocultural context, but cannot elevate cultural difference so that structural power is erased (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Swan and Snow (2006) use an intersectional approach—with particular emphasis placed on social, historical, and cultural contexts—to understand the complex nature of women's use of force. Their:

model proposes a number of risk and protective factors that appear to be related to women's use of violence with male partners, including the male partners' violence against women, experiences of childhood trauma, women's strategies for coping with problems in their relationships,

women's motivations for using violence, and the outcomes of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and PTSD. (p. 1039)

Cultural issues often overlap with the methodological issues noted earlier in this section. Mainstream IPV research, however, lacks necessary sociocultural contexts. Greater attention to cultural context requires multi-methods approaches to investigate the nuances and complexities of women's circumstances. As Yoshihama (1999) points out, turning over a dining table is a culturally specific form of abuse in Japan because it questions women's legitimate role in the family, while dousing a woman with liquid in Japan conveys she is impure or contaminated. Garfield's (1991) life history interviews with African American women reveal that the women "did not always regard physical aggression as violence, whereas acts of racism were uniformly experienced as such" (p. 42), and so could raise concerns that calling the police would subject Black men to racist treatment by the CLS and confirm racist stereotypes. Similarly, Bui and Morash (1999) report that Vietnamese women—who have been taught that saving face and family unity are more important than individual safety—may be at a disadvantage in a system that believes otherwise. Women's responses to these actions reflect a distinct cultural milieu that may be misunderstood by outsiders.

Sexuality complicates the gendered use of force. Being cognizant of the similarities and differences introduced by LGBTQ relationships and IPV is as vital to include in research and practice as is highlighting cultural issues. Early research conducted by Renzetti (1998) asserted that, although power and control over one's partner is inherent in both heterosexual and lesbian IPV, we cannot lose sight of the homophobic social context in which abuse occurs. For instance, Ristock (2002) reminds us that lesbians who are not "out" to their friends, family, landlord, or employer are at risk from an abusive partner, who may disclose their sexual identity. Fear of a homophobic response from the CLS or social services could also prevent an abused lesbian from seeking help or thorough assessment of which partner is using force. Furthermore, the legal system has been hard pressed to appropriately address the needs of transgender women caught in violent relationships (Goodmark, 2013). Thus, intersectional approaches to examining women's use of force need to take sexuality and gender identity into account, in addition to culture, "race"/ethnicity, immigration status, disability, social class, and age (Collins, 2015).

Faulty assumptions of “real” victims

Assumptions about what a “real” victim looks like perpetuates the problem in research, CLS response, and programming. This is a complicated issue; it was important in the early days of the battered women’s movement to construct an image of a “blameless” battered woman in order to garner public sympathy, understanding, and resource support, and to underscore the message that “battering affects every woman” and “it could be anyone.” However, this “trivializes both the dimensions that underlie the experiences of these particular abuse victims” (Kanuha, 1996, p. 41) and suggests that there is universal risk. When battered women are portrayed as blameless “good women,” they are touted as passive, nonviolent, and visibly afraid of the abuser (Berns, 2004; Lamb, 1999; Loseke, 1992). This image is harmful when it prevents service providers or CLS personnel from further assessing situations that are far more nuanced than initial presentation may suggest (Creek & Dunn, 2011; Dunn, 2008; Larance & Miller, forthcoming; Larance & Rousson, 2016). It also ignores the structural issues that complicate women’s daily lives, such as when poor women of color are “most likely to be in both dangerous intimate relationships and dangerous social positions” (Richie, 2000, p. 1136).

Trauma-informed approach

The emerging focus on trauma-informed, gender-responsive practice (Bloom et al., 2004) acknowledges survivorship histories in ways useful for practitioners and researchers. It is very appealing because it validates how early trauma could have a long-lasting impact, and can help to understand why adults traumatized by violence may have frightening flashbacks and fears. For survivors who blame themselves for their victimization, understanding research that finds this connection could absolve them of their internalized shame or guilt. Finally, trauma research has facilitated treatment interventions that have been very helpful for victims.

However, there are limitations. If trauma is understood as an individual psychological response, it could be seen as a “psychological condition caused by exposure to violence/extreme stress, leading to the assumption that all types of traumatic events are precursors of psychological symptomatology, unless the victim is exceptionally resilient” (Gilfus, 1999, p. 1241). Additionally, an individual pathology-oriented explanation could ignore victims’ agency, and may be used to

excuse men's violence if they too experienced trauma (Gilfus, 1999). If we focus too much on childhood traumatic experiences, we risk losing structural factors—including racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression—that could also be just as traumatic. By focusing on the trauma victim, we also ignore the person who has hurt them. We must not lose sight of the social and political context and the gendered nature of the inequalities of power within which IPV occurs.

Service utilization issues

Research and practice (Dichter, 2013; Miller, 2005; Osthoff, 2002) reveal that, for many women, it often takes being arrested to receive the services they need. One woman in Dichter's (2013) study said: "[Arrest] saved my life – but it shouldn't work like that." When a woman receives help only after she is arrested, it is a wakeup call for the spectrum of violence prevention programs. In some jurisdictions, advocacy organizations believe they cannot help victims who are arrested because of the organization's rules or funding restrictions. This means many women do not receive emotional support, tangible assistance, shelter opportunities, and other resources they desperately need from their local advocacy organizations. In addition, many women are court-ordered by judges to "anger management" groups; this demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the women's circumstances, and wastes the women's time and limited resources on services that do not address their needs. Those needs include opportunities to address the gendered power and control dynamics of IPV, heal from possible survivorship issues, and explore viable alternatives to using force in a safe, nonjudgmental space.

Women who have used force: Emerging issues from arrest to intervention

Connie's⁵ story illustrates the complexity of understanding and addressing one woman's situation. Of course Connie's story is unique, as is each woman's story, but understanding common themes will facilitate tailored intervention innovations that lead to violence reduction.

Case study

When Connie and Steve first met, it was “like a romance novel,” according to Connie. But all of that quickly changed after Steve convinced Connie to quit her job, leave her children, move to the US, and marry him. As soon as she married him the physical and emotional abuse began. He controlled everything. She relied on him for transportation, her right to remain in the US, and her daily needs. Late one evening, after she had prepared to go to bed, Connie heard Steve talking on the phone to a member of his extended family. After the call, she begged him to finally introduce her to his extended family members. During the argument, he put his clenched fists up to her face to threaten her. She grabbed his fists to protect herself, and when he jerked his hands away, one of her fingernails inadvertently caught the skin on his cheek. Connie panicked, thinking Steve would hit her. Instead, he calmly encouraged her to go to the garden, not to worry, and have a cigarette. While in the garden Connie heard the doorbell ring. When it continued to ring, Connie went to see who it could be. She was shocked to find two police officers at her front door. The officers were responding to Steve’s call, made while Connie was in the garden. He alleged that Connie had attacked him and showed the police the scratch to prove it. During questioning, Connie took responsibility for scratching Steve. She did not detail the abuse she had suffered and how she feared his clenched fists. Connie went to jail and was threatened with being deported.

Arrest

Connie’s situation provides a framework for understanding the gendered differences in behavior at the time of police intervention. In contrast to men who batter, women who have used force in their intimate heterosexual relationships typically take complete responsibility for their use of force—from the time of police response, through court proceedings, and during group intervention sessions. Like Steve, men who batter women often minimize, deny, and/or blame women for the violence. In many situations, the only difference between a woman who is referred to a battered women’s/domestic violence shelter and a woman who is sent to jail and/or an intervention program for her use of force is whether or not she is arrested.

Connie’s situation can be generalized to many women’s situations. When the police arrive at the scene, a woman is often crying, detailing

her abusive actions, and asking how she can help him. In contrast, he often remains calm, quiet, and apologetic for wasting the police officers' time. His manipulative presentation to the (often male) police officers typically escalates her frustration and impassioned "truth telling." As first responders, the police then see a calm man who may be bleeding and what many have described as a "hysterical" woman. Her perceived hysteria contributes to the perception that she is unbalanced and "obviously" guilty. Similar to Connie, she is reluctant to disclose her survivorship story to the responding officers, because she sees her partner as having power well beyond the presenting incident. She may be asking herself: Will I need to go back to him? What will happen to my children? Where will I live if he kicks me out? Answers to these questions may discourage her from telling the officers about her survivorship history. From her perspective, she is initially relieved that the police are there because she believes they will serve as the neutral presence needed to calm him down; she is not aware that most officers believe they must leave having made an arrest. Unfortunately, she often finds that police intervention results in her being labeled the "perpetrator" and his being identified as the "victim" (Frye et al., 2007; Larance, 2006, 2007).

In many states, women who are charged with domestic violence lose jobs that are contingent upon state licensure (such as child care providers, cosmetologists, doctors, lawyers, social workers, and nurses), as well as their public housing and financial aid (Bible & Osthoff, 1998; Worcester, 2002). Native women may be prevented from returning to the reservation, while immigrant woman can be and often are deported. Renzetti (1999) notes that these collateral consequences are examples of widespread gendered injustice, and Pence (2012) frames this as a human rights issue.

Courtroom

The gendered distinctions in behavior at the time of women's arrest are present in the courtroom as well. There women are much more likely than men to detail their actions, with the belief that telling "the whole truth" to the judge will result in justice being served. Men, however, often obfuscate their role in the altercation. Attorneys often complicate women's cases because they typically do not understand the complex dynamics of IPV. In addition, many women have explained that their attorneys have discouraged them from taking the case to trial for a range of reasons—including the expense and the need for

them to get back to the children, who are typically being cared for by a family member—and attorneys may remind the woman that he has more money and will drag the case out as long as possible in order to bankrupt her. Women are urged to plead “no contest,” which will result in a domestic violence charge but will “get [her] out of court faster.” Many women take their attorney’s advice, not realizing the long-term implications of a guilty plea (Miller, 2005; Larance & Rousson, 2016).

Community supervision

Once on probation or parole, women in the community are often much more vulnerable to the men who are abusing them. Ann, a member of a group created for women who have used force (Gondolf, 2015; RENEW, www.csswashtenaw.org/renew), explained: “Because he was the ‘victim’ he knew more about my probation than I did . . . the prosecuting attorney explained everything in detail to him . . . and now he knows where I live!” Due to the vulnerability Ann describes, a gender-responsive (Bloom et al., 2004), contextual approach to probation and parole is critically important to positive outcomes for women (Cross, 2013; Morash, 2010; Neal, 2007).

To meet this need, probation and parole agents must be aware of gender-specific challenges to women’s compliance (Cross, 2013), particularly intentional manipulation of women’s probation/parole status by their abusers. Abusers’ tactics include, but are not limited to, making false allegations to probation/parole agents if women do not have sex the way they demand, do not buy drugs for them, and/or refuse to sign over child custody. This attempted, and often successful, manipulation of probation/parole agents also includes abusers self-inflicting wounds and using these as “proof” that the women are abusing them (Larance & Miller, forthcoming; Larance & Rousson, 2016). Probation/parole agents must also be aware that blanket conditions for the women’s compliance often set the women up for failure. Such conditions may include, for example, requiring low-income women who have never used drugs to complete weekly drug tests at their own expense and/or enroll in excessive programming (in areas such as parenting and budgeting)—also at their own expense—within an unreasonable period of time. This constellation of events sets women up for failure, when it is the system that has failed them.

Toward tailored intervention

Community supervisors' challenges are, in many ways, shared by those providing community-based intervention. For example, many intervention providers across the nation place women in groups designed for men who batter, and/or with men in the same intervention group. This is revictimizing and ineffective. By using a "one size fits all" (Gardner, 2007; Miller et al., 2005) approach to intervention, practitioners may be unintentionally escalating the violence in the women's lives rather than providing necessary support and opportunities for change. Indeed, domestic violence service providers struggle with how to philosophically and practically assist battered women caught in the legal system for using force. Those in a movement focused on providing safety to battered women are justifiably concerned that shifting attention away from men's violence against women will be detrimental to the movement and the women they hope to serve.

As Gardner (2007) points out, intervention for battered women who have used force presents practitioners with the ethical quandary of how to effectively serve these women in a manner that addresses the violence but is not punitive and shaming. According to Dasgupta (2002), identifying the women as batterers and "resocializing them to be nonviolent through education classes that are similar to men's programs seems illogical and inappropriate" (p. 1368). However, referring women to voluntarily seek survivor services and discuss their use of violence within that setting does not seem promising either (Larance & Rousson, 2016). When female survivors of domestic violence begin to use violence as a strategy to navigate their relationships, it increases their male partner's violence against them (Dieten et al., 2014; Larance, 2006; Swan & Snow, 2002). It also increases the likelihood that the women will be severely injured by their male partners, as well as the probability that the women will use force again.

Given the risks to women and their families, there is a need for contextual intervention tailored to their circumstances. Such intervention, Larance (2006) suggests, is possible from a "healing place" approach that builds upon traditional survivor support group strengths, yet is distinctly different from batterers intervention programs. This approach, grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological nested model, holds promise for reducing violence and rebuilding lives.

Curricula

An early “guide book” meeting this need was written by Erin House (n.d.) of the Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House in Ann Arbor, MI. This guidebook provides an essential grassroots resource for antiviolenace practitioners, and a framework for community-based⁶ violence intervention with women. Since the guidebook’s creation, three main curricula were developed to meet the evolving needs of programs serving women in the community who were court-ordered to intervention for their use of force: *Vista: A Program for Women Who Use Force* (Dieten et al., 2014; Larance, 2006; Larance et al., 2009); *Turning Points: A Nonviolence Curriculum for Women* (Pence, Connelly, & Scaia, 2011); and *Beyond Anger and Violence: A Program for Women* (Covington, 2014).

The *Vista* Program curriculum outlines 20 sessions focused on providing women the opportunity to heal from the past while exploring viable future options. During group participation, the women plan for their safety; address feelings of shame and/or guilt related to their use of force, and strategies for moving beyond that shame and/or guilt; are encouraged to identify appropriate levels of responsibility, rather than responsibility for everything that “went wrong” in the relationship; explore personal skills and resources in light of cultural messages they have received about “appropriate female behavior”; and increase their awareness of alternatives to using force.

The goal of the *Turning Points* curriculum is to help women understand connections between the violence they experience and the violence they use—and to end both. The three-part curriculum focuses on domestic violence and its impact on relationships and family; different aspects of violence, such as feelings of guilt, feeling justified, and feeling trapped; living with anger; talking to children about the violence; and understanding the impact the use of force has had on their partners.

Beyond Anger and Violence is a manualized intervention for women that focuses on anger and use of force. It utilizes a multimodal approach and a variety of evidence-based therapeutic strategies: psycho-education, role playing, mindfulness activities, cognitive behavioral restructuring, and grounding skills for trauma triggers. The companion DVD, *What I want my words to do to you* (by Eve Ensler), is incorporated throughout the 21 program sessions. *Beyond Anger and Violence* offers a comprehensive framework for addressing the role past trauma plays in the lives of women who struggle with anger. It

includes detailed empowerment tools, exercises, and activities focused on self-examination, self-soothing, and managing anger.

As curricula have gradually developed to meet programming needs, professionals' resource-sharing opportunities have evolved. In 2007, the W-Catch22 Listserv (2007) was established to provide such opportunities to activists, advocates, law enforcement, the judiciary, and service providers, while also streamlining gender-responsive, context-focused responses to women's use of force. In 2014 and 2016, the W-Catch22 Listserv international membership of 321 agency representatives was informally surveyed regarding whether or not they had community-based programming for women who use force; if so, which curriculum they used in their work; and what, if any, evaluation tools were in place to assess outcomes. Forty-one service providers from six countries—Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), Malta, the UK, and the US—and 21 different US states responded to the survey. While two respondents (in Australia and Malta) said they were in the process of implementing programs (Australia would be implementing Turning Points; Malta planned to implement Vista), the other 38 respondents indicated that they either used Vista, Turning Points, or Beyond Violence exclusively; integrated Vista, Turning Points, and Beyond Violence curricula content; modified existing curricula from the program for men who batter; or created a separate in-house curriculum that met program and agency needs. Two programs (in Michigan and Wisconsin) assessed for recidivism and utilized pre- and post-tests to measure program effectiveness. The RENEW Program in Michigan also utilized quarterly evaluations to gauge program impact. Five programs (from Alabama, Delaware, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin) distributed satisfaction surveys at program completion.

Hong Kong's Nurturing Heart Program, based at Harmony House, provided an example of how Hong Kong's first shelter program innovatively addressed a complex issue according to cultural needs. The Nurturing Heart program was initially part of a 3-year pilot project to address women's use of force (Queenie Tao, Executive Director, Harmony House, personal communication). The pilot project began in July 2011 and was completed in November 2014. One result of the pilot project was a Chinese-language training manual on working with women using force. The program, which secured renewed funding in 2016, involves 10 psycho-educational group sessions and a curriculum culturally adapted from the Vista model. Additional wraparound services include individual counseling, family relationship enhancement support programs, and workshops and sharing sessions for

multidisciplinary professionals. To date, the agency has worked with 99 women who identify as having used force against their family members.

Recommendations for work with women who have used force

As programs identify curricula that meet the needs of the women they serve, there are essential programmatic components necessary for effectively serving this population.

First and foremost, ongoing assessment is crucial to women's healing and sustainable intervention. Not only are women's situations constantly changing, but also women who have used force are not a homogenous group. Women court-ordered to programming for their use of force may need a range of concurrent services, such as counseling for sexual assault, substance abuse, mental health, and/or domestic violence survivorship. Note that when assessing for domestic violence survivorship, women who have used force will typically not initially self-identify as "victims" or "survivors." Therefore, assessment questions must focus on specific situations women may have experienced, such as: "Has your partner ever kicked/punched/slapped you?" The questions must also assess for coercive control, which women may have experienced or may be currently experiencing, such as: "Are there ways that your partner can hurt you that may seem crazy or misunderstood by other people?" Likewise, gaining a deeper understanding of whether or not women dread a partner's presence or involvement in a particular situation are critical (Larance, 2017). Questions about the extent of an abuser's micro-management or surveillance of daily life may be more informative for assessment purposes than those that focus primarily on whether or not someone self-reports fearing their partner.

In addition to ongoing assessment, the group session structure and process are critical. Although many women may state that they prefer individual sessions to group intervention, group sessions are generally more beneficial, as they have the capacity to promote social networks and long-term supportive relationships among women who are often isolated due to the abuse they have suffered. However, group intervention sessions for women who have used force must be comprised only of women. In the event that there are not enough women for a group, individual sessions may then be a short-term alternative. During each contact with the women, practitioners must reinforce that behavior change within an abusive relationship can potentially place women at increased risk of harm. Thus, using new

behaviors encouraged in group are at her discretion. Each woman knows her situation and knows when (or if) it is safe to integrate new behaviors. Safety and support planning must be a priority, particularly in the forms of promoting healthy relationships and raising awareness of available community resources. Sessions must also raise awareness of power and control dynamics of abuse and the impact of the abuse on extended relationships with children, family, and friends. Space must also be provided for women to explore any shame and/or guilt they may feel for their situations, while encouraging healing and promoting awareness of viable alternatives to using force. In order to encourage successful participation and completion, onsite childcare and sliding-fee scales and/or scholarships are a necessity; these enable women to attend group sessions at little or no personal cost.

Policies and procedures must be in place to ensure that women are not penalized for missing group sessions due to extenuating circumstances, particularly abusers manipulating the women's attendance with the goal of having women violate the terms of their probation/parole. During each woman's program participation, there must be communication with and education for the CLS personnel (probation/parole agents) involved in the women's lives. Such communication and education must focus on the intervention program's role as a support, intervention, and advocacy opportunity for the women—a role that is separate from the monitoring function of probation/parole. For additional recommendations, see Cross (2013), Dieten et al. (2014), House (n.d.), Larance (2006), Neal (2007), and Guidelines for Programs Working with Women Who Use Force (2011).

Upcoming challenges

In an effort to more closely standardize and supervise BIPs that serve men who abuse their partners, most states have implemented standards for programs providing intervention to service participants (Ferency, 2016; Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2009). A looming issue for many states is how to—and even whether or not to—implement standards for programs serving women who have used force. This is particularly challenging—and potentially problematic—due to a lack of understanding among CLS, police, advocates and practitioners of the dynamics of women's use of force and effective intervention.

States struggle with the issue, utilizing a variety of approaches. For example, Section 4.2 of Michigan's intervention standards states

This document refers to batterers who are male, reflecting the predominant pattern of domestic violence. Most men are not batterers, but most batterers are men. Female battering towards males occurs, as does battering in lesbian and gay relationships, but until more is known about appropriate intervention in such relationships, these standards will apply to a [Batterer Intervention Program] for men who batter. (Batterer Intervention Standards for the State of Michigan, 1998)

It is clear that further collaborative investigation, by researchers and practitioners, is critical to informing these conversations so that state standards ultimately reflect the nuances of programmatic needs.

Conclusion

Ellen Pence (2012) reminds us that achieving justice involves the actions of exposing the truth, repairing the harm that the injustice caused, and changing the social conditions that brought about the injustice. In the case of addressing the complexity of women's use of force, context-based research exposes this truth, while innovative, gender-responsive programming may provide promising avenues toward forging a form of justice for these women. The larger task will be creating social conditions that recognize the ripple effects of men's violence against women, as well as the continued fortitude needed to work toward prevention. In a culturally competent manner, we must continue to think beyond the established paradigm of relying so heavily upon a CLS response to IPV. While such a response has saved many lives, it has also led to dire consequences for many women, who continue to be at risk.

Notes

1. The authors' equal contributions pertain to their respective research and practice expertise.
2. We recognize that not all women who use force are survivors of IPV. However, in our research of 208 women court-ordered to programming for using force, only one of the women who had used aggressive violence did not indicate a history of domestic violence.
3. Although we recognize that women use force in same-sex relationships, our focus in this chapter is on heterosexual IPV. More details will be provided in a subsequent section.

4. Women often do not experience it as a "justice" system; therefore, we use the term criminal legal system (CLS).
5. Women's names and certain identifying details have been changed and/or omitted to protect their privacy.
6. For programming for incarcerated women, refer to Larance et al.'s (2012) *Meridians for incarcerated women: Facilitator manual* and *Meridians for incarcerated women: Participant workbook*, and Covington's (2013) *Beyond violence: A prevention program for criminal justice-involved women*.

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Facilitating Change: A Process of Renewal for Women Who Have Used Force in Their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

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Abstract

The authors highlight a community's response to women's use of force, detail aspects of intervention strategies, and introduce a conceptual model representing the women's change process. In doing so, they encourage community partnerships, continued intervention innovation, and further research. Their observations suggest an intervention philosophy and approach that women have described as one of personal "renewal." The community's experiences are notable in light of national efforts to effectively meet the needs of female survivors of intimate partner violence who have used force.

Keywords

women who use force, intervention with women, intimate partner violence, domestic violence

Introduction

Theoretical, contextual analysis of battered women's use of force in their intimate heterosexual relationships is well documented in four special issues of *Violence Against Women*, published in 2002, 2003, and 2012. Underexplored, however, is the diversity of community and programmatic responses to this emerging issue. This practice note provides an overview of one community's approach, with particular focus on the Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence Through Education for Women (RENEW)

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Program at Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County. The purpose is to inform practitioners and researchers of promising intervention practices. By highlighting one community's experiences, detailing aspects of RENEW's intervention strategies, and introducing a conceptual model of the women's change process, the authors encourage community partnerships, continued intervention innovation, and rigorous empirical evaluation of such programs.

A Community's Course: Background

Washtenaw County's anti-domestic violence partners advocated for, and Ann Arbor City Council adopted, a Mandatory Arrest Ordinance in 1987. The ordinance required police to make arrests, under certain circumstances, in domestic violence cases (Ann Arbor, Michigan, Municipal Code § 9:68 [last visited January 7, 2014]). The ordinance was intended to implement a Duluth Program–inspired coordinated community response to domestic violence. Within 1 year of ordinance adoption, domestic violence arrests increased from 28 (1986) to 248 (1987) (S. McGee, personal communication, January 6, 2014). The City Council also created a multi-disciplinary Domestic Violence Coordinating Board composed of a domestic violence survivor, domestic violence shelter representative, batterer intervention program director, law enforcement officer, probation agent, and city prosecutor. The Board met monthly to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the Mandatory Arrest Ordinance.

An on-call team, staffed out of the Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House (now SafeHouse Center and hereinafter referred to as such), was established the same year (E. House, personal communication, January 5, 2014). The Team's goal was to provide immediate, in-person contact with survivors of domestic violence following law enforcement officers' action. The team provided in-person support and advocacy 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, following referrals from the 10 Washtenaw County–based law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement officers paged the team members after completing their domestic violence call investigation. In keeping with the original goals of the warrantless arrest laws enacted in the late 1980s, nearly all calls to the police, and resulting referrals to the on-call team, in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s involved males investigated and arrested for assaulting their female partners. However, in the mid- to late 1990s, trends emerged in Washtenaw County that reflected trends in communities across the United States. The number of women arrested for domestic violence involving their male partners and the number of dual arrests began to increase. When this increase occurred, the on-call team's goal was challenged because the identity of the domestic violence “survivor,” within an advocacy definition of domestic abuse, was not necessarily the person the police identified as the victim. This was also further complicated when both parties were arrested.

The increase in women's arrest rates and in dual arrest rates was believed to reflect male batterers' increasing familiarity with both domestic violence laws and the police criteria governing domestic violence arrests. Batterers began to effectively manipulate law enforcement and their female partners, resulting in increasing dual arrests and women-only arrests by being the first to call the police, self-inflicting injuries, or

making sure they had visible injuries and their partners had none. SafeHouse Center advocates knew that the growing number of arrested women—both heterosexual and lesbian—demanded a nuanced approach. At one point, advocates learned that a battered woman had been arrested for protecting herself against the man who battered her by swinging a sand pail at him. Advocates responded by protesting in front of the Ann Arbor Police Department, holding sand pails, in an effort to bring public attention to the issue (S. McGee, personal communication, January 6, 2014).

SafeHouse Center advocates responded to the increase in women's arrests by creating advocacy and assessment guidelines (House, n.d.). The guidelines served as a local, and later national, framework for advocates addressing women's criminal legal involvement for their use of force. The assessment guidelines were critical in differentiating between legal and advocacy definitions of domestic violence (Burk, 2004). SafeHouse Center's advocacy was pivotal in drawing the courts' attention to the fact that cases involving women as domestic violence defendants were not and should not be treated equivalent to cases involving men who were arrested and charged with domestic violence (E. House, personal communication, January 5, 2014). Community partners were encouraged to make sure that conscious differentiations were made between the legal positions of "suspect/defendant" and "victim" when an arrest and/or domestic violence charge was brought, versus the position of "batterer" and "survivor" within the greater context of the relationship as a whole. The only way this could happen was to do a thorough assessment in every case. SafeHouse advocates provided the motivation for community partners to look more closely at what they were doing and why they were doing it.

Members of the criminal justice system struggled with the issue, given the belief system at the time that men and women must be treated equally to be treated fairly (E. P. Hines, personal communication, May 4, 2013). Probation agents and battered women's advocates were faced with difficult decisions. One probation agent responded by encouraging women convicted of domestic violence offenses to voluntarily seek SafeHouse Center counseling and support services. This move challenged SafeHouse Center advocates' commitment to survivor autonomy in making decisions related to engaging in services. SafeHouse staff struggled philosophically with receiving court-referred, violence-involved women for victim-focused counseling. Probation agents and judges needed a place to send women for intervention and support, but struggled with court ordering the women to do so. James Henderson, a former 15th District Court probation agent, explains, "Essentially telling the women to 'stay out of trouble' did not work because they didn't go for services, and so they had no support or help" (J. Henderson, personal communication, May 15, 2013). The result? According to Henderson, women in Washtenaw County were re-arrested on domestic violence charges at a higher rate than men who the court ordered to attend intervention services. Often the new assault charges were the result of women resisting the violence against them by preemptively using force, in an effort to gain some control over the battering they experienced (House, n.d.; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). These women now had multiple arrests—including felonies—and suffered all the consequences associated with being repeat offenders. It was evident that this approach was ineffective in addressing women's survivorship issues and had little or no effect in reducing their use of force.

For a brief period, women were also referred to an individual practitioner who provided gender-informed intervention, addressing a variety of the women's intersectional issues (Crenshaw, 1991; J. Henderson, personal communication, May 15, 2013). After the practitioner was no longer available, Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County established the Women's Alternatives to Domestic Aggression (W-ADA) Program in May 2006 (D. Garvin, personal communication, May 13, 2013). This program utilized a gender-neutral, batterer-specific model. Within a relatively short time, program administrators and members of the criminal legal system determined that W-ADA was ineffective. Many women refused to attend W-ADA group sessions, reoffended, or said they would rather go to jail than participate in W-ADA. Many explained that they could not identify with the content or approach of the W-ADA group sessions.

In August 2007, the RENEW Program was founded as the replacement for W-ADA. Gender-neutral, perpetrator-focused programming was shelved in favor of gender-responsive, trauma-informed (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004) support and intervention, firmly grounded in acknowledgment of the multiple structural inequalities confronted by women of diverse cultural and social contexts (Gilfus, 1999; Richie, 2000). During the transition, RENEW staff provided training—offered to all community partners by judicial invitation—that encouraged a contextual approach to understanding and addressing women's use of force. The training emphasized the critical need to explore the full context of women's experiences to sustainably and effectively intervene in their lives.

Since RENEW's founding, community partners have praised the program's results (E. Hines, personal communication, May 4, 2013). These include access to and completion of General Equivalency Development examinations, receipt of community college scholarships, improved understanding of courtroom procedures, and increased access to child care, housing, and legal aid. In addition, RENEW staff cultivated the relationship with SafeHouse Center that includes advocates' quarterly observation of RENEW group sessions and voluntary referral of RENEW participants to SafeHouse Center's support services. The community's course and lessons learned are notable in light of national efforts to effectively meet the needs of female survivors of intimate partner violence who have used non-self-defensive¹ force in their relationships.

RENEW Program: Overview

Fundamental to RENEW's approach is the awareness that women's use of force against their intimate male partners is gendered and, therefore, distinctly different—in terms of the motivation, intent, and impact—from the actions used by men who batter women (Anderson, 2009; Batterer Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan [BISC-MI], 2010; Dasgupta, 2002; Larance, 2006, 2007; Larance & Dasgupta, 2012; Miller, 2001, 2005; Miller, Gregory, & Iovanni, 2005; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006; Renzetti, 1999; Saunders, 1986; Stark, 2007). Grounded in this awareness, RENEW's group sessions provide women opportunities for personal “renewal”² through a variety of intervention strategies. Women gradually embrace the

intervention approach as they heal from past trauma while exploring choices that contribute to a vision of their future selves and violence-free lives.

Although some women self-refer, most enroll in RENEW after they are sentenced on domestic violence charges and, following the recommendation of probation, are ordered to attend by the judge. The women first call the program coordinator to schedule an intake assessment. They complete the intake, and then join one of two weekly open group sessions. The open groups provide intact group norms³ in which facilitators and veteran group members validate new members' feelings of anger and frustration. Established members explain and demonstrate to the new members, in the words of a veteran, "Don't worry, it won't always hurt this much . . . the pain is temporary" and "Here I learned it does get better." Through group sessions, previously isolated women are connected with each other and exposed to a range of shared resources (Larance & Porter, 2004). Resources exchanged and expanded include rides to group sessions, employment leads, improved access to transportation, additional child care, substance abuse recovery support, and formation of independent groups focused on exercise and child care. The hope that "things get better here because we can talk about everything" reinforces resource sharing among the women, which, in turn, builds and strengthens their social networks.

RENEW: Within the Circle

Each RENEW group session is member-led and marked by a ritual opening and closing. A group member opens the session as group leader by reading an inspirational poem or playing a song that has both personal meaning and is relevant to the session. The leader then lights a candle in remembrance of intimate partner violence survivors as well as women who have used force because they did not recognize an alternative course. The group leader proceeds by inviting members to "check-in." Check-in themes range from identifying an action and/or behavior used in the past week that reflects their personal integrity to describing a holiday challenge. Although women are typically court-referred to RENEW, little group session time is spent exploring referring incidents. Instead, group sessions focus on healing and personal growth through daily choices.

Following each woman's check-in, facilitators guide group session discussions by integrating topics from Vista (Larance, 2006; Larance, Hoffman-Ruzicka, & Shivas, 2009) and Meridians (Larance, Cape, & Garvin, 2012) curricula with common themes from the women's check-ins. The themes and member-initiated topics are woven together in a manner that is member- and group-centered rather than facilitator- and curriculum-driven. This approach is dependent upon the comfort and common experiences of group members. In the words of one RENEW member, "I wasn't gonna talk about [the abuse I suffer at home] but her story was just like mine so I decided to." Women often describe the group sessions as feeling more "like a conversation between friends than a class we have to go to." The role of RENEW facilitators is similar to that of model-setting group session participants (Yalom, 2005), as they reinforce the message that each woman "is her own best expert" in evaluating (Arnold & Ake, 2013) and developing viable alternatives to her use of force.

As group time comes to a close, facilitators and the group leader encourage a transition from the session's intimacy to the coming week's challenges and celebrations. The group leader then chooses another participant to lead the following week's session, and reads a ritual closing acknowledging the complexities of the women's use of force and life choices. The women collectively close group by standing in the circle and reciting a meditation.⁴

Method

Observations explored in this note pertain to the authors' experiences facilitating RENEW intervention and support groups. Between August 2007 and June 2013, a total of 239 unduplicated RENEW participants were observed. Observations took place while facilitating two weekly group sessions. The observations and direct statements made during group sessions were hand-recorded. Women's feedback provided during quarterly computer-based evaluations and final presentations (both oral and written) were used as supporting information. RENEW member ages at the time of service ranged from 18-66 years; the median age was 29 years. Group members' self-identified ethnic/racial identities included White (40.17%), Black/African American (30.54%), Other/Multi-Racial (1.67%), Middle Eastern (0.84%), Black/Caucasian (0.84%), Asian/White (0.42%), Asian (0.42%), Black African (0.42%), Native American (0.42%), and 1.67% also identified as Hispanic (from the White and Other/Multi-Racial groups). Almost one in four women (24.27%) did not report ethnic/racial identity. RENEW group members' annual income ranged from US\$0-US\$120,000; the median annual income was US\$32,000. Probation agents recommended and judges ordered more than 90% of RENEW participants to services. Because the majority self-identified as heterosexual, the focus of this note is on heterosexual relationship dynamics. The terms *group members*, *members*, and *women* are used interchangeably to refer to RENEW support and intervention program members. Although the majority of women in RENEW do not initially identify as survivors of intimate partner violence, the majority of the women observed describe a pattern of coercive control that often includes violence perpetrated against them by their former and/or current heterosexual partners. For the purpose of this note, the term *partners* refers to the women's male intimate partners.

This note from practice is based upon observations made while facilitating intervention program group sessions involving women from a metropolitan Midwestern community. Therefore, caution must be used in generalizing the findings beyond this setting. The note's purpose is to contribute to knowledge about an underexplored area of intervention. This note provides anecdotal information, often in the women's own words and from their perspectives. Therefore, objective, rigorous empirical evaluation of RENEW and similar programs is needed. Additional research on women's use of force, particularly among women with different cultural and geographic experiences, would contribute to a broader understanding of the complex nature of this population.

Observations

Power and Control Through Her Eyes

From a woman's first call for services through her final program contact, RENEW facilitators observe a clear distinction in women's narratives between their *wanting power*—by trying to access personal autonomy from a partner (use of force)—and *having power* through the exercise of personal authority over a partner (battering/coercive control). Women arrive at their intake with a keen understanding of how this “wanting versus having” distinction feels in their intimate relationships, but they often struggle to describe the power differential. Many women hesitate to disclose the magnitude of their domestic violence and/or sexual violence survivorship histories, which they describe as overshadowed by their use of force. Other women detail histories of abuse, but do not identify as either a “survivor” or a “victim.”

The differences between her seeking autonomy (her use of force) and his exercising authority (his battering/coercive control) are detailed in RENEW Program members' diverse descriptions of their partners' ongoing coercive control (Anderson, 2009; Stark, 2007). One woman's partner, for example, routinely demanded she wait to take a shower before he came home from work so he could smell her body and make sure she had not “been with” another man. Another woman's partner regularly insisted she wait to do the laundry until after he came home from work. When he came home, he would smell her underwear and make sure her “underwear doesn't smell like another man.” Many women detail their common struggle to make sense of these private actions, and describe them as gradually eroding their sense of self. The partners of women in RENEW demonstrated their use of coercive control by sabotaging the women's court-ordered participation. Some refused to give the women gas money to drive to group sessions. Others would leave the house without notice shortly before the group session, so the women were left without someone to care for their children. Similar to Roy's (2012) observations, partners of women in RENEW also attempt to manipulate the criminal legal system. Some male partners of RENEW participants threatened that if they did not buy and/or sell drugs for the men, they would call the women's probation agents and allege that the women physically assaulted them. RENEW participants reported that their male partners self-inflicted wounds and then contacted the women's probation agents claiming that the women had attacked them. Some ex-partners enlisted their current girlfriends to make false claims against the RENEW member, knowing the false claims would place the women in violation of probation. One man effectively used a woman's RENEW enrollment as “proof” that the woman was an unfit mother, providing a judge with “evidence” that resulted in her temporary loss of custody of their child. These examples highlight the complexity of the gendered nature of power and control experienced by RENEW participants, as well as potential collateral consequences of chosen interventions. The examples emphasize the need for nuanced intervention in which staff advocate for the women, while providing them tools to navigate survivorship histories and opportunities to explore alternatives to violence.

Acknowledgment: A Foundation for Healing

The Power and Control Wheel (Pence, n.d.) is a useful intervention tool because it explains the abuse of men who utilize coercive control and violence, while helping women acknowledge their domestic violence survivorship histories. Facilitators and veteran group members introduce the Wheel as a tool created by and for women who have been hurt by their male partners. Upon seeing the Wheel for the first time—and understanding that it was created by survivors—many women describe feeling a sense of relief.⁵ One participant remarked, “It feels so good to see what I’ve been through all down on paper.” Another noted, “It makes me know I am not crazy because I see it all here.” Many women embrace the Power and Control Wheel as a “touch-stone” in detailing that, although their use of force “turned the tables,” the shift was brief and primarily served to escalate the violence and/or coercive control used against them. New members then explain that if they used the behaviors noted on the Wheel, they did so to gain short-term control of the abuse they were experiencing.

Whereas the Power and Control Wheel provides women the opportunity to reflect upon their survivorship histories, the My House exercises (Larance et al., 2012) provide women the opportunity to explore how they experienced power and control as children (Family of Origin House), as adults (Intimate Relationship House), and to then consider how they envision healthy future relationships (Future House). In doing so, they gain an extended view of the role power and control has played in their lives and use this as the foundation to build future relationships. During these exercises, women are asked to illustrate what their family of origin and a recent intimate relationship “look like” in terms of who has the power and what it feels like to live in that “house.” They are then asked to illustrate what they want their future relationships to “look like.” Women have used a variety of symbols including a super-hero costume to identify a custodial grandparent and a thunderbolt to denote the atmosphere of chaos in their Family of Origin House, a shovel in the backyard to denote an abusive partner’s threats that he will kill her, flowers in the front yard to depict the joy of children in and around an Intimate Relationship House, and sunshine, an equality sign, and a vegetable garden to symbolize the equitable, nonviolent, and healthy relationship they hope for their Future Relationship House.

Women have shared that illustrating and presenting the three Houses provides the opportunity to identify and acknowledge a range of experiences and emotions including how anger was handled in their family of origin, possible sources of personal shame, why their childhood rape was never discussed or acknowledged by family, betrayal by alcoholic parents, loss of family status with a new sibling’s arrival, how they navigated the trauma of sexual abuse at an early age, the diversity of power holders in their lives, and how their definitions of personal strength and weakness have evolved. A gradual shift in self-awareness and perception is observed during this process. This shift is one from passive individual to whom things were done, to an active agent who makes decisions on her own behalf. For many women, this revised perception is challenging because, up to this point, they have often taken responsibility for everything that “went wrong” without recognizing the full range of their relationship dynamics. With a deeper understanding of the context of their actions, they are able to

honor themselves for navigating the chaos in their lives, and transition out of the shame and self-blame they feel for their use of force.

Language: Morality, Strategy, and Power

Women frequently describe how they have experienced power and control, or tried to utilize power and control, from the perspective of “morality”—what was “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong” about their choices. Commonly, women share feelings of shame, self-blame, and self-judgment for having used force. Although women may not use the specific terminology of “shame,” their detailed experience with this emotion is evident in their use of moralistic and judgmental language. The valuation implicit in this language reinforces the vicious cycle of, “I did bad things so I am a bad person.” For many women, this assessment-of-self seems paralytic. A useful tool in breaking this cycle and facilitating women’s expanding view of themselves and their options is giving women permission to briefly set aside the framework of morality (good vs. bad choices) and consider one of strategy (What would I like to see happen in this situation? What choices do I have to make this happen?). The framework shifts from (moral): “I should do _____ because _____ is the right thing to do,” to (strategic): “I will _____ because I want _____ to happen.”

This shift in language encourages critical thinking. It also helps women consider their actions from the perspective of accomplishing what seemed strategically appropriate at the moment of the incident, while reflecting upon the resources they saw themselves having at the time. Utilizing their expanding resources, group members and facilitators encourage women to take the next step by planning for how they want to respond in the future. For example,

I understand that I did what I did because I wanted to feel powerful in the midst of my abuse, so now I am ready to explore other actions/behaviors that contribute to my feeling more powerful while maintaining my personal integrity.

Facilitators encourage group members to share how they define power—what power “looks like” and what makes one “powerful.” They emphasize that power is inherently neither good nor bad. This is contrasted with the idea of weakness—what weakness “looks like” and the attributes of a weak person. Women often mention how their perceptions of power and weakness evolve through their time in RENEW. They recognize that they initially tried to use power, as they saw it and defined it at the time, to assert themselves and gain autonomy. What they ultimately work through in the group sessions is their definition of that power, what it looked like then, what it looks like now, and what they want it to look like in the future. Thus, their understanding, definition, and application of power evolve as they heal and move forward.

Critically important to the process of women’s evolving language and perception of self, is the language women use to describe their actions. Often, women’s sense of agency is unintentionally undermined by terminology that minimizes their choices. Terms used in group sessions that undermine the women’s efforts include “just,” “sort of,” “in a way,” “kind of,” “I think so,” “maybe,” and “I guess.” A woman who says, “I

just took some time to think before I responded” minimizes her actions. In opposition, a woman who says, “I took some time to think before I responded” is not minimizing. To remind women of the importance of their choices and the impact of language, facilitators and group members repeat minimizing words as soon as they are spoken. The woman who used a minimizing term is then encouraged to restate her example, but this time omitting the minimizing word. Done in a supportive, nonjudgmental environment, this collective experience—of being reminded and reminding others to take full credit—reinforces personal empowerment.

The Anger Umbrella: A Conceptual Model of Change

RENEW facilitators consistently identify a complex interplay of emotions by women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Many women initially state, “I’m angry!” A closer look at how the women describe that “anger” suggests multi-dimensional, multi-layered emotions that include shame, guilt, confusion, fear, sadness, grief/loss, betrayal by self and others, and forgiveness of self/forgiveness of others. The process of experiencing and exploring these feelings seems to lead to self-acceptance (Figure 1).

This is consistent with similar findings (Frasier, Slatt, Kowlowitz, & Glowa, 2001; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994). Understanding the evolution of these emotions is a critical aspect of effective intervention with women who have used force.

Women’s anger may be quietly and assertively stated as, “I’m happy and glad I did it and I hope I hurt him.” It may also be emphatically and loudly stated as, “This isn’t me! I can’t believe I am here.” For many women, “anger” centers on the injustice of their arrest after years of abuse by their partner. Other reasons for their anger include their partners’ affairs with other women, taking full responsibility at arrest while their abusive partners denied initiating the violence, not understanding that pleading “no contest” meant admission of guilt and multiple collateral consequences, losing their jobs because of domestic violence charges, inability to secure jobs due to the domestic violence charges, child protective services’ involvement in the family’s life, intimate partners’ sexual assault of their children, and women’s court order to attend RENEW. Their self-identified anger is validated and described by facilitators and veteran group members as a normal, healthy emotion. In the words of one RENEW member, it is like an “umbrella” because “it covers up everything under it and protects you from everything else.” Unraveling and understanding the complexity of the anger is the focus of much of women’s time in the program.

Once women form connections with other members and identify with the group sessions’ safety and ritual, their anger seems to subside and become more malleable. Women who identify feeling shame often state they feel immobilized by a hatred for themselves rather than the actions they used. This shame impedes their transition to guilt for multiple group sessions. The shame is an expression of self-hatred, whereas the guilt is a dislike of their actions. Their intractable “shame” may be a result of feeling stigmatized for being identified as “bad” by their arrest (Dichter, 2013) and then struggling to reconcile that stigma with their self-identity.

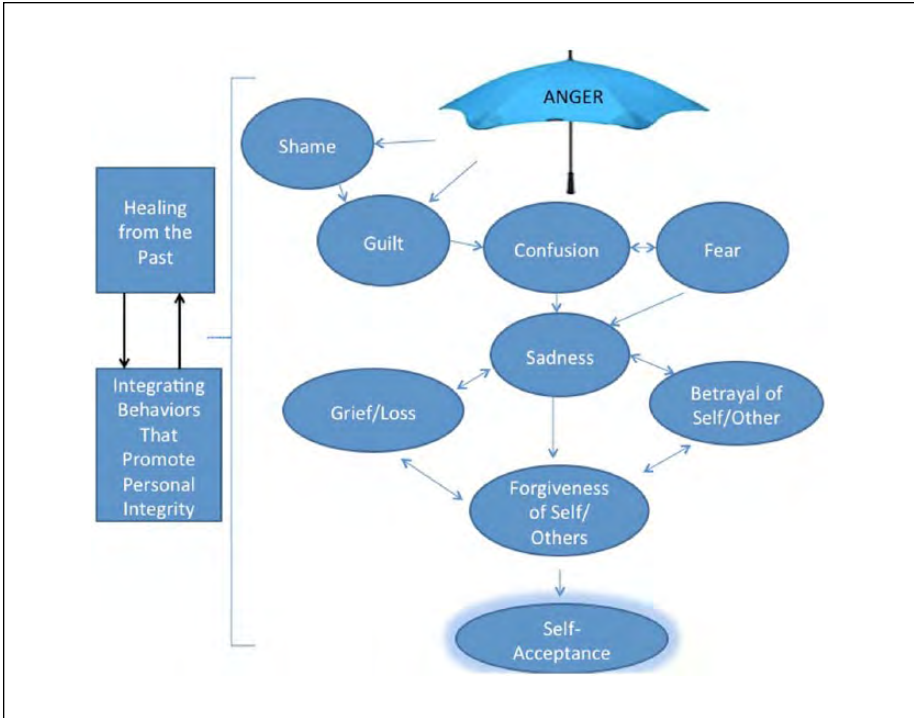


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Change Process.

Other women initially identify feeling guilty, but not shameful, and use the guilt as an avenue to discuss their sadness. They self-identify as sad for “everything that has gone wrong.” Some women state feeling fearful, not for their physical safety, but for “how he can continue to manipulate the [criminal legal] system against me” and “do things that other people don’t get,” like orchestrating her loss of the physical and/or legal custody of their children, gaining sole access to her home, severing connections with her family members, or undermining her stable employment. The fear seems to be experienced as a “give and take” with feelings of confusion. The confusion has been articulated as, “Well, he said I have an anger problem so maybe I am the ‘batterer’?” and “What if I am really crazy like he says I am?” One woman explained this confusion as, “He put me in jail, then had me hospitalized for being crazy, so now I guess the grave is next. I don’t know what to do.”

Discussing the confusion and fear seems to provide many women the opportunity to more deeply explore their sadness. They report feeling sad because their children witnessed their arrest or because they realize they “cannot hold up a sinking ship” on their own. One woman described this emotion as feeling sad and exhausted because she could not “keep [her] marriage afloat.” By holding her forearm in the air at an angle she explained, “My marriage looks like a sinking ship. I know it can’t last that way but all I can do now is try to keep it floating in the water.” This woman explained that she was, at once, sad and grieving. For her, it was the death of a dream.

The women's expressions of sadness seem delicately balanced with feelings of betrayal and grief. For some women this means they feel betrayed by their partners, others feel they betrayed themselves, whereas many women state feeling both. The feelings of grief and loss center upon "the death" of their relationship and lost hope for the future. Women describe the grief as "complete emptiness." Exploring betrayal and grief often gives way to a group member-generated discussion of forgiveness. Many women spontaneously suggest that perhaps forgiving their partner for his actions used against them is what the women feel they need to do before they can "truly heal." Further exploration of this emotion often leads women to the conclusion that they actually need and/or want to forgive themselves for a range of issues including "believing things had changed at the okeydokey,"⁶ "wasting years of my life trying to save him," "staying longer than I should have," "staying because of the kids," "getting taken again," "forgetting who I am," "trusting him again and again," "feeling disrespected but still staying," and "becoming just like him because I used violence." Given the group composition and setting, women articulating this need and desire for self-forgiveness may be culturally and geographically specific and deserves more attention in future work.

It is important to note that RENEW group sessions take place within a Euro-American/Judeo-Christian cultural framework. Given the diversity of group membership and the individual nature of healing and change, it is understandable that not all women identify with each emotion and some state feeling certain emotions more intensely than others. For example, a West African woman did not identify with a desire to seek or receive forgiveness for using force against her husband, whereas African American and Caucasian women in her group sessions spoke of the concept of forgiveness, of self and others, as playing a large role in what they referred to as their healing. Although the West African woman did not identify with the predominant feelings expressed during particular group sessions—denoting the uniqueness of each woman's lived experience (Richie, 2000) and the importance of culture in shaping those experiences (Bui & Morash, 1999; Dasgupta, 2002; Yoshihama, 1999)—the women provided her the space to safely and non-judgmentally explore her point of view.

Having explored forgiveness, both for themselves and their partners, many women seem to gradually gain self-acceptance. One woman summarized her feelings as, "OK, so I did something wrong. I felt bad about it. I have taken responsibility. 'Live and learn.' It's time to move on." For some women, self-acceptance comes in the form of externalizing their experiences and, for others, attributing their actions to an alternative persona. Laura reflected, "I was a different person when I came here." Nikki reported that she stabbed her partner and "got myself into this mess for all that" because of "that other woman I become when things go too far."

Implications for Practice

RENEW Program participation provides women who have used force in their relationships the opportunity to heal from past trauma while focusing on daily choices that

promote who they want to be and how they want to live. Fundamental to RENEW's approach is the awareness that women's use of force is distinctly different from the actions used by men who batter women and, therefore, demands tailored, gender-responsive intervention. RENEW's intervention approach deserves greater attention due to its observed ability to reach an underserved population: women who detail survivorship histories but many of whom do not self-identify as domestic violence victims or survivors and, therefore, do not seek services through traditional domestic violence survivor support agencies. The change process introduced in this note has multiple implications for professionals involved in the women's lives. For example, by understanding that the women's anger is concealing their vulnerability, perhaps first responders and service providers will be better informed regarding effective communication strategies with the women. Further implications are likely to be revealed through the conceptual model's use. In particular, its application will be informed by exploring its relevance to other geographical areas and with women from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

RENEW's intervention and advocacy efforts are enhanced by community partnerships. These partnerships, evident in a variety of situations, nurture sustainable change at the systems level. A critical aspect of such partnerships is education. Formal training offered by RENEW staff to judges, advocates, probation agents, law enforcement officers, prosecuting attorneys, and public defenders was critical to a shift in thinking about and addressing women's use of force. The training, offered by judicial invitation, seemed to have a ripple effect across the community. Judges and probation agents listened to the case studies, discussed themes they too had observed, and decided to revisit cases. In one instance, a woman's terms of probation were significantly reduced. Over time, community partners have also witnessed obvious changes in women who complete RENEW. Anecdotally, the Honorable Elizabeth P. Hines, 15th District Court Chief Judge, who presides over a domestic violence docket, states if women complete RENEW, "I know they will get help, they will get all sorts of support, and I know I will not see them again [in the courtroom]" (E. Hines, personal communication, January 7, 2014). For example, one woman who had chosen jail in lieu of continuing to attend W-ADA reoffended. She was then court-ordered to complete RENEW. She completed the program and received staff support in obtaining a full scholarship to college. In addition, David Oblak, a 15th District Court probation agent, notes that women who have completed RENEW have not reoffended as measured by reports to the court (D. Oblak, personal communication, January 7, 2014).

These formal partnerships are evident during a range of events such as monthly county domestic violence task force meetings, bi-annual BISC-MI (2010) conferences, and Center for Court Innovation Ann Arbor Open Houses. The informal nature of these trustful community relationships is a fundamental component of "what makes things work" in advocacy efforts for the women (Putnam, 2000). For example, trust cultivated between a police detective and a RENEW staff person have enabled multiple late night cell phone calls. The officer has reached out to RENEW staff on the scene when, "It looks like she is the perpetrator but I think I may be missing something." Similarly, probation agents' gender-responsive approach to their work (Morash,

2010), and regular communication with RENEW staff, enable information sharing in a manner which circumvents unintentional collusion with the true batterer, promotes women's autonomy, and addresses women's diverse needs. Likewise, RENEW staff's bi-annual SafeHouse Center volunteer trainings on women's use of force contribute to a community knowledge base about the issue. They also send a powerful message about community-based alliances in addressing this shared challenge. Effectively facilitating change, through intervention and advocacy for women who have used force, demands a community's commitment on multiple levels. This community's evolving approach suggests that education, partnership, and gender-responsive intervention are central to this ongoing effort.

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Notes

1. This is "non-self-defensive" as it does not meet the legal definition. However, many women describe their use of force as "self-defense" meant to protect the essence of who they are but do not feel in imminent physical danger. Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence Through Education for Women (RENEW) staff refer to this as "defense of self."
2. One of the first program participants in 2007 used the term *renewal* to describe how she felt while attending group sessions. Thus, the program was named RENEW.
3. According to Yalom (2005), in every group a set of unwritten rules or norms evolve that determine the group's procedure.
4. RENEW Program completion includes 30 contacts and the final presentation.
5. Because the Wheel illustrates power and control dynamics utilized by abusive men against women in intimate heterosexual relationships, the Wheel should not be used to detail women's forceful actions. Instead, there is a need for an alternative visual tool, which contextually depicts women's use of force as informed by their survivorship histories.
6. The term *okeydokey* is used by the women in reference to their partners. One woman's "okeydokey" begged her to return, assuring her "things were better now" and that "he had changed." After returning she found, instead, that nothing had changed.

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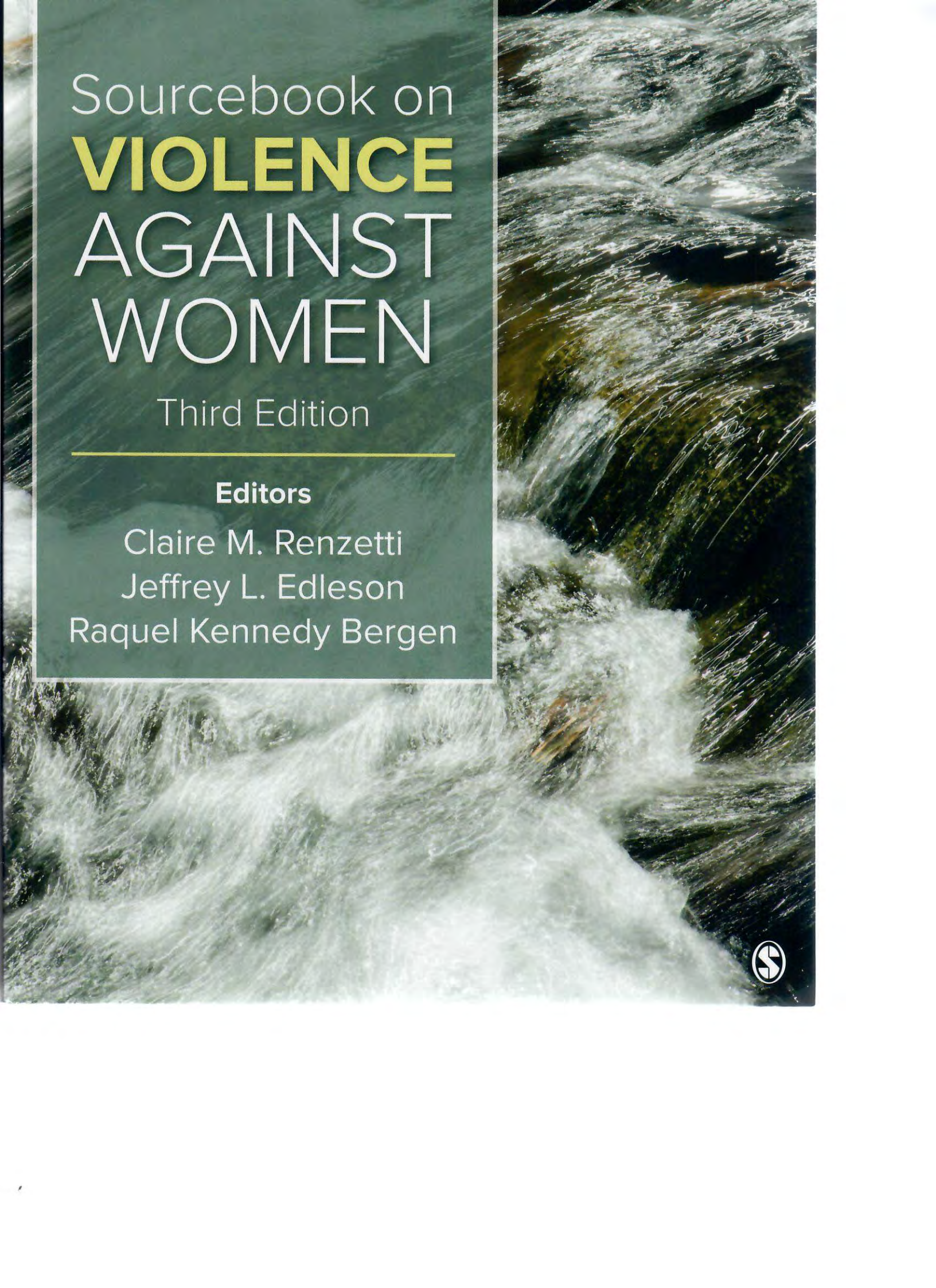
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Current Controversies: Programs for Women Who Have Used Force in Intimate Relationships

Lisa Young Larance

For more than a decade antiviolence advocates, practitioners, and scholars (Dasgupta, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Larance, 2006; Larance & Dasgupta, 2012; Larance & Miller, 2015; Larance & Rousson, 2016; Miller, 2005; Osthoff, 2002; Renzetti, 1999; Roy, 2012; Worcester, 2002) have addressed the philosophical and practical challenges to providing court-ordered, community-based services to women with domestic violence survivorship histories, who have also been arrested for using force against their intimate male partners. Community-based service provision for battered women identified by the criminal justice system (CJS) as "perpetrators" is complex. Fundamental to this evolving effort has been and continues to be the understanding that such services be implemented and facilitated in a manner that respects the women's survivorship histories, is nonpunitive, is nonshaming, and encourages personal integrity. Such services must maintain a macrosystems focus on the myriad institutions that perpetuate violence against women and the microsystems focus on the primary perpetrators of intimate partner violence: men who batter women.

Philosophically, antiviolence practitioners acknowledge and consistently revisit the multiple ethical implications inherent in mandated intervention for *victim-defendants* (Gardner, 2007). With this acknowledgement is agreement that practitioners avoid using a one-size-fits-all approach in work with women (Miller, Gregory, & Lovanni, 2005). Far too often, court-ordered batterer intervention programs designed to address men's battering tactics become the framework for community-based intervention with arrested women. Not only is this potentially revictimizing and traumatizing, it is ineffective. With this acknowledgement is the growing awareness that voluntary community-based referrals for violence-involved women may be of little value. Anecdotal evidence suggests that voluntary referrals may actually result in additional charges for the women, as they seem to not seek the support and intervention that could address possible trauma while potentially reducing future use of force (Larance & Rousson, 2016). Philosophical implications of programming must also include attention to the culture, ethnicity, economics, and sexual orientation and identity of the women caught within the complexity of this issue (Dasgupta, 2002; Potter, 2008). Cultural competency and humility in programming are essential to effectiveness.

Practically, the evolving solution to this complex issue is grounded in tailored, gender-responsive intervention. However, such intervention is contrary to current established research that uses quantified checklists rather than exploring the motivation, intent, and impact of using force. Such contextual intervention is founded upon the principles of trauma-informed care, as well as nuanced understanding of the structural inequities that contribute to women's intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Gilfus, 1999). In short, the women's violence, often used to equalize the violence used against them, is but one component of their lives (Larance, 2012). To this end, programming grounded in a *healing-place philosophy* has promising implications (Larance, 2006).

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Programming Resources

Four main resources frame promising practices for addressing women's use of force: Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House's advocacy guide (House, n.d.); *Vista: A Program for Women Who Use Force* (Larance, Hoffman, & Shivas, 2009; Dietsen, Jones, & Rondon, 2014); *Turning Points: A Nonviolence Curriculum for Women* (Pence, Connelly, & Scaia, 2011), and *Beyond Anger and Violence* (Covington, 2013).

House's work sets the tone for community-based programming that contextually addresses women's use of force. The guidebook outlines the issue by defining terms, overcoming challenges to appropriate services, and suggesting assessment strategies for advocates in shelter settings. It charted the course for *Vista*, *Turning Points*, and *Beyond Anger and Violence* curricula.

Vista provides an extended view for serving this diverse population. In 20 psychoeducational group sessions, women have opportunities to heal from their past experiences while exploring future nonforceful options. With the focus on thorough assessment, education, support, and advocacy, group session participants begin the process of moving beyond shame, identifying appropriate levels of responsibility, and increasing their awareness of viable alternatives to using force.

The goal of the *Turning Points* curriculum is to facilitate women's understanding of the connections between violence they experience, violence they use, and to end both. The three-part curriculum focuses on domestic violence, as well as its impact on relationships and family; different aspects of violence, such as feelings of guilt, feeling justified, and feeling trapped; and living with anger, talking to children about the violence, and understanding their partner's experiences.

Beyond Anger and Violence focuses on anger and use of force. It utilizes a multimodal approach and a variety of evidence-based therapeutic strategies such as psychoeducation, role-playing, mindfulness activities, and grounding skills for trauma triggers. Throughout the 21 program sessions, *Beyond Anger and Violence* offers a comprehensive framework for addressing the role past trauma plays in the lives of women who struggle with using force.

Essential Programming Components: Women's Use of Force

Advocates and practitioners largely agree that components necessary for effective, sustainable intervention include women-only support and intervention group sessions; group sessions cofacilitated by those who understand the dynamics of women's use of force and the coercively controlling nature of men's battering tactics; safety and support planning; exploration of the collateral consequences of battered women's arrests; raising awareness of alternatives to force; opportunities to increase social-support networks; education for referring CJS personnel; and extensive community resources. Community resources may include referrals for continued education; employment opportunities; job training; legal services; and counseling for sexual assault, substance abuse, mental health, and/or intimate partner violence survivorship. It must also be emphasized that social connections, particularly those made between women during the intervention process, could be an essential part of sustaining the women long after agency contact has ended.

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Discussion Questions

1. How is women's use of force distinctive from men's battering behavior in heterosexual relationships?
2. What are essential components of program intervention with women who have used force?

Resources for Further Study

First national conference on women's use of force, *When She Hits Him: Why Gender & Context Matter*. Batterers Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan (BISC-MI). Pontiac, MI, November 4–5, 2010. <http://www.biscmi.org/wshh>

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Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence through Education for Women (RENEW) program website with audioconferences, bibliography, and additional resources: www.csswashtenaw.org/renew

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Lisa Young Larance, a practitioner-researcher, founded the Vista and RENEW Programs, which provide gender-responsive intervention, advocacy, and support for women who have used force in their relationships. She also cocreated *Meridians for Incarcerated Women*, a prison-based curriculum, in addition to launching and moderating the international W-Catch22 listserv. W-Catch22 provides resource-sharing opportunities for advocates, members of the judiciary, practitioners, probation agents, and researchers. Ms. Larance and Shamita Das Dasgupta coedited a 2012 *Violence Against Women* special issue on battered women's use of nonfatal force, recipient of the 2012 *Violence Against Women Best Article Award*.



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Serving Women Who Use Force in Their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships: An Extended View

Lisa Young Larence

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Serving Women Who Use Force in Their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

An Extended View

Lisa Young Laranca

This article explores the author's practice observations while working with women who use force (WWUF) in their intimate heterosexual relationships. The VISTA Program's approach to assessment, education and support, and advocacy frames a description of the impact services have had on the lives of WWUF. By contextualizing a woman's experiences, with the aid of the ecological nested model, VISTA staff tailor services to member needs. This article's purpose is to provide an extended view of serving WWUF, one grounded in a "healing place" approach that builds on traditional survivors support group strengths and is distinctly different from batterers' intervention.

Keywords: domestic violence; social work practice; women who use force

The Anti-Domestic Violence Movement at a Crossroads

For more than 30 years, anti-domestic violence advocates have worked tirelessly to raise public awareness of intimate partner violence, particularly abuse of women at the hands of their intimate partners. Where there were no shelters or funding sources to assist battered women, grassroots advocates stepped in to ameliorate the problem by volunteering time, energy, and resources. Their cumulative efforts turned the tide and laid the foundation for a powerful anti-domestic violence movement. In the process, advocates and practitioners—spurred on by the feminist philosophy of

Author's Note: My sincere thanks and admiration to Jane Baldwin, whose pioneering vision and unrelenting courage made VISTA's creation and evolution possible; to Mary Baughman, for her oversight and willingness to see the program into existence; and to Maryann Lane Porter, for her critical work on VISTA's development. Conversations with Shamita Das Dasgupta, Anne Marshall, Tina Olsen, Andrea Bible, Nancy Worcester, Jeanne Scala, Nina Rifkind, Lisa MacGray, and members of the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women's subcommittee on women's use of force brought essential analysis, exploration, and insight to VISTA's creation, development, and ongoing work. My thanks to Karen Cochran, Elka Grisham, and Leigh Anne Kelley for their editing expertise and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. I acknowledge the generous support of the van Ameringen Foundation for VISTA operating funds. I am indebted and grateful to the women who have become VISTA members; by trusting me with their stories of personal challenge and triumph, I am able to share the power of their resilient spirits.

women helping women—increasingly provided survivors of domestic violence the opportunity to live safer lives than they thought possible once their spiral of abuse began (Dasgupta, 2002; Schechter, 1982; Worcester, 2002).

However, in the early 1990s, those in the movement began to notice an apparent rise in individual and dual arrest rates (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Martin, 1997; S. L. Miller, 2001) among battered women. This, along with decontextualized research based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), fueled a perception that women's violence was becoming more prevalent (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Kimmel, 2002) across the United States and that rates of domestic violence among men and women were equivalent (Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 1997). However, when motivation, intent, and impact were used to distinguish between violent actions, researchers and advocates (Dasgupta, 2002; Kimmel, 2002; Lischick, 1999; Saunders, 1986; Worcester, 2002) established that women and men do not use force or violent behaviors equally and that, in fact, the majority of women who use force against their partners are survivors of domestic violence (Edelson, 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Saunders, 1986, 2002).¹

Responding to the perceived increase in women's arrests, the criminal justice system sought batterer intervention programs for women charged with domestic violence offenses. Advocates and practitioners were then in the awkward position of having to respond to court decrees while not knowing the appropriate way to do so. Some continue to question whether or not there should be specific intervention programs, apart from traditional domestic violence support groups, for women who use force (Osthoff, 2002; Worcester, 2002) because they view women's use of force as survival mechanisms that do not demand a separate response. Other "community-based battered women's [programs] . . . will not assist battered women charged with crimes (especially if the alleged crime is an assault against her partner) because, they say, they cannot or will not work with 'perpetrators'" (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1527).

Deciding to Serve Women Who Use Force

Jersey Battered Women's Services (JBWS) staff became part of the women who use force discussion through participation on the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women's (NJCBW) subcommittee on women's use of force. JBWS staff knew that women's use of force was nothing new, as nonresidential program support group survivors had long discussed their self-defensive and retaliatory use of force in their intimate relationships. But what was new and troubling about the changing climate that catalyzed the growing discussion was that battered women were now becoming involved in the legal system as perpetrators for their use of force in intimate relationships. JBWS staff grew particularly concerned because those who desperately needed services—the women who use force—were becoming lost in the controversy between the criminal justice system, child protective services, researchers, advocates, and practitioners. As employees of a well-established domestic violence

agency, the organization's leaders were confident that JBWS could play a positive role in the evolving process of addressing women's use of force.

As an ongoing part of this process, the VISTA Program was created. The name VISTA was chosen to indicate the program's "extended view" of women's use of force. Its creation and implementation were driven by a realization that women who use force do not have institutional support, let alone the appropriate assessment, education and support, and advocacy to address their complex circumstances (Osthoff, 2002). Therefore, VISTA's general goals are to provide these missing resources. JBWS staff believe it is the agency's role to advocate on behalf of all people in unsafe intimate relationships, regardless of their gender or criminal history.

Women Who Use Force: The Power of Language

Appropriately addressing women's use of force must begin with clear language that truly speaks to women's experiences (Osthoff, 2002). Developing and consistently using specific, nonjudgmental language is an integral and ongoing component of the detailed VISTA Program process, one that entails advocating for and educating women who use force while simultaneously educating the institutions with which they come into contact. For this purpose and the purpose of this article, the term *women who use force* is used as an umbrella term that refers to physically, verbally, and emotionally detrimental behaviors used by a woman toward her intimate partner. In contrast, House (2001) defines violence as "a type of force used unjustly with the intention of causing injury. Force itself is descriptive of the use of physical strength to accomplish a task—but does not imply the same degree of wrong-doing or harmful intent" (p. 2). VISTA Program staff use the term *use of force* to identify women who have used both primary and retaliatory aggression in their intimate relationships. Likewise, *men who use force*, when spoken of in the VISTA setting, refers to men who have used physical, verbal, and/or emotional behaviors that the women describe as primary and retaliatory aggression.

In contrast, *battering* is defined and understood as a systematic pattern of violence, the threat of violence, and/or other coercive behaviors and/or tactics, with the intention of exerting power, inducing fear, and/or controlling another person (Dasgupta, 1999, 2002; House, 2001; Osthoff, 2002; Stark, 1995). Also referred to as *coercive control* (Stark, 1995), battering often combines assault with intimidation, isolation, and control. Battering's infrastructure does not necessarily involve violence with weapons, but its cumulative effects—be they physical, verbal, situational—destroy an individual's access to basic personal liberties. "Battering is far more than a single event . . . because it teaches a profound lesson about who controls a relationship and how that control will be exercised" (Schechter, 1982, p. 17). It is important to note that violence, use of force, and battering are not acceptable ways to express anger. However, just because an individual used violence and/or force once does not make that person a batterer (Dasgupta, 1999; House, 2001). In short, "Not

everyone who hits [her] partner is a batterer. A hit is not a hit is not a hit. Context matters. A lot. A whole lot" (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1540).

Like others (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Osthoff, 2002), VISTA Program staff observed that women have the capacity to batter. One member of the VISTA Program struggled weekly to change her battering behavior, behavior that had destroyed more than one of her intimate relationships. In general, however, VISTA staff observed that the majority of heterosexual women in VISTA used force in their intimate relationships to gain short-term control over their situations, not to exert ongoing coercion and control over their partners. It is critical that the distinction among use of force, violence, and battering be made at every step in VISTA assessment, education and support, and advocacy. When appropriately deconstructed for the listener, the linguistic distinctions send a message to the women, their partners, the courts, and referring agencies that most women's use of force is a separate, distinct behavior from battering (Dasgupta, 2002; Osthoff, 2002) and demands different intervention.

In this process of creating a language, VISTA Program philosophy aligns with Osthoff's (2002) point:

We need more accurate labels . . . why can't we call the people who have been hit by their partners, "have been hit by partner" and those who have hit their partners, "have hit partner"? . . . We need to do a much better job when we label those who use violence against their partners. (p. 1531)

In the VISTA Program, for example, a woman who is a survivor of domestic violence and who has used force is referred to as "a survivor of domestic violence who began using force against her partner 17 years into the relationship," or "She is not a survivor of domestic violence but uses force and believes her actions do not serve her in her relationship." It is more time-consuming to speak about women in VISTA in this way. But with this specific language, discussions with advocates inside and outside the agency, and with referring agencies, are more productive and less emotionally charged (Osthoff, 2002). Thoughtful language is pivotal to interagency coalition building.

Furthermore, it is critical that appropriate language is used when speaking with women in VISTA. When a VISTA staff person speaks with clarity and uses non-judgmental language in reference to the woman's actions and history, the VISTA staff person is taking the first step in partnering with the woman in her journey from shame and guilt for her actions toward workable alternatives, acknowledging the role choice plays in expressing her feelings. Nonjudgmental language models a non-judgmental approach that paves the way for a woman's introspection. VISTA members are eager to learn the distinctions among the terms *women who use force*, *violence*, and *battering*. This immediately helps them begin to make sense of their situations and name behaviors they may have found difficult naming in the past,

which underscores Osthoff's (2002) point, "If we talk with clarity about women's use of violence, we will enhance our credibility and make our services more welcoming to battered women who use violence" (p. 1538).

Ecological Nested Model (ENM)

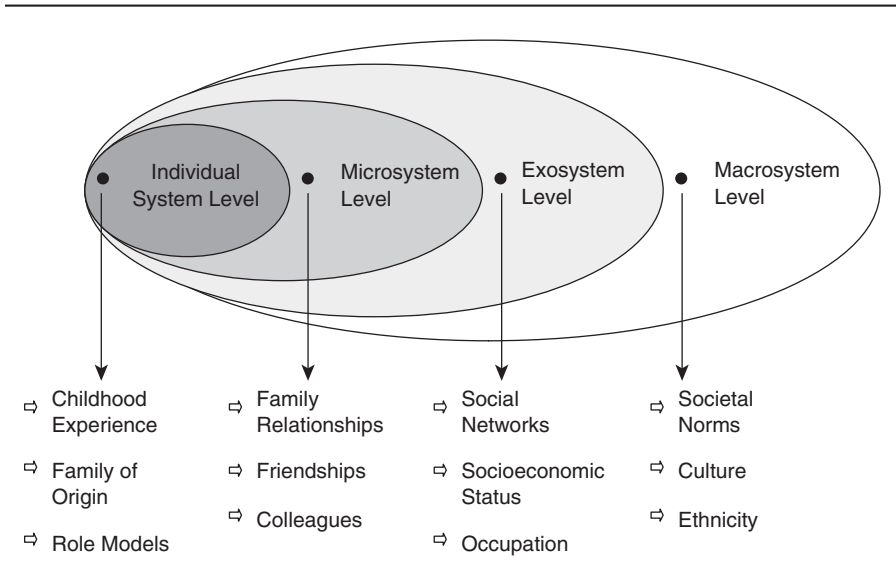
As appropriate language is critical to productive discussions concerning women who use force, an appropriate framework for assessing, understanding, and then addressing women's use of force is paramount. Dasgupta (1999) reminds us that "intimate violence does not occur in a vacuum. It is nested within the sociocultural context of a nation and is maintained, as well as supported, by its structures" (p. 200). When addressing women's use of force the meaning and consequences of that force, rather than isolated incidents, must be the focus (Worcester, 2001). The ENM (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; UNIFEM, 2003), according to Dasgupta (2002), is the most appropriate tool for understanding women's use of force because it allows analysis of women's violence from a multilayered and interactive perspective, one that

provides us with a valid and complex understanding of violence by women as it takes into account the interactions of antecedents (e.g., historical context, social prescriptions of gender roles, social and legal reactions) as well as immediate conditions and consequences (e.g., early socialization, individual experiences, intentions, partner's responses, repercussions on the individual as well as work and family) of such actions. It helps ascertain the full contexts of women's experiences in their use of violence. (p. 1376)

The four interrelated levels of the ENM are (a) the individual level that explores a woman's perspective of her childhood experiences, including family of origin, socialization, and role models; (b) the micro-system level that encompasses a woman's current family, situational, friendship, and workplace relationships; (c) the exosystem level that involves the formal and informal structures and institutions with which a woman comes into contact throughout her life such as social networks, socioeconomic status, and occupation; and (d) the macro-system level that addresses the societal norms that govern a woman's life experiences, such as her culture and ethnicity. Figure 1 provides examples of the ENM's four interactive layers.

VISTA Program staff understand that, as a social service domestic violence agency, the program's role and goal are separate and distinct from those of law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and child protective services. With this understanding comes a deeper commitment to the necessity of critically evaluating women's use of force by contextualizing it. Using the ENM in this process can create a service provision atmosphere that honors women's life experience rather than condemns their actions. By having the opportunity to safely and nonjudgmentally discuss the range of emotions, events, and contributing factors surrounding her use of force, a woman has an opportunity to learn from her experiences and move toward a safer future.

Figure 1
Ecological Nested Model



Program Overview

JBWS is a multiservice domestic violence agency whose mission is the prevention of domestic violence through victim protection and empowerment, family member rehabilitation, and public education about domestic violence and its consequences. JBWS's VISTA Program began providing services in August 2002 to women who used coercion, control, force, and/or violence in their intimate relationships. VISTA's creation, implementation, and services are driven by the belief that women who use force against their intimate partners—be they domestic violence survivors or not—are putting themselves and others in their lives at greater risk of harm. To be eligible for services, a woman must have used non-self-defensive force in her intimate relationship with her current partner or former partner. Women who have used self-defensive force are referred to the agency's Community Counseling Program that serves domestic violence survivors.²

VISTA's primary intervention is curriculum-based, psychoeducational support groups.³ During the rolling admission, one-and-a-half-hour, 16-week support group, women learn about the dynamics of domestic violence as they gain knowledge and skills to facilitate safer lifestyles. The primary referral sources for VISTA include the criminal justice system, child protective services, community counseling programs, and self-referral. VISTA does accept women mandated by these institutions. Although

mandated services are not ideal for serving survivors of domestic violence (Osthoff, 2002), VISTA staff view mandated referrals as a part of the evolving process—rather than a final result—of this emerging service provision area.⁴

Method

Observations explored in this article pertain to the author's experience managing the VISTA Program and cofacilitating VISTA support groups and do not reflect on practice outside JBWS.⁵ Observations of 53 unduplicated female VISTA program members took place from August 2002 to August 2004. Of those observed, 52 were heterosexual, and one identified as lesbian, as indicated through self-report. Because only one lesbian woman was served, this article focuses on heterosexual women's experiences. Member ages ranged from 18 to 57. Group members' ethnic diversity—African American (1), Caucasian (38), Latina (12), and South Asian (1)—reflects the agency's service area. Of the women served, 17 identified as survivors of domestic violence in previous relationships, 12 identified as survivors in their current relationship, seven identified as survivors in their previous and current relationship, and 17 reported no history or current experience of domestic violence survivorship.

Of the women observed, three were women whose use of force was motivated by an imminent physical threat to their lives. Therefore, they were referred to the Community Counseling Program, and the courts were informed of the purpose of the referral. Nineteen of the women assessed stated that their use of force was motivated by previous years of abuse by their current or previous partner, but they believed there was not an imminent threat to their lives at the time of the incident. These women were considered survivors of domestic violence who began to retaliate, as they explained, by using their partner's "tactics against them." Eleven of the women assessed were survivors of abuse in a prior relationship(s) but did not use force in that relationship(s) and did not have the opportunity to address their victimization. These women are also considered survivors of domestic violence. Survivors referred for, or voluntarily enrolled in, services used force in the following ways: destroyed their partner's property, used a weapon when trying to prevent their partner from leaving during or after an argument, used a weapon to elicit a response from a partner whom they believed was ignoring them, stabbed their partner to gain control during an argument or as a response to a partner's threats to leave the relationship, and bit their partner in response to their partner's threat to leave the house. The eight women in VISTA referred to and voluntarily enrolled in the program report no previous history or current experience of domestic violence survivorship in their relationship. These women used force in the following ways: repeatedly broke restraining orders, destroyed their partner's property, threatened to kill their former partner because of child custody issues, and physically assaulted their partner.

The research method used was participant observation. Group members' feedback and limited statistical data were also gathered from weekly client feedback

forms, client satisfaction surveys, and annual program outcome measures. The limitations of this diverse method are the small sample size and anecdotal findings. The observations may be generalizable to the extent that providers are working with women who use force in a structured, support group program for those women. For the purpose of this article, the terms *women* and *group members* are used interchangeably to refer to the female VISTA support group members who are survivors of domestic violence who have used force against their intimate partners and women who are not survivors of domestic violence but have used force against their intimate partners. The term *partners* refers to the women's male partners. The terms *VISTA Program staff*, *VISTA staff member*, and *VISTA worker* are used interchangeably to refer to the VISTA program manager, VISTA counselors, trained VISTA volunteers, and VISTA student interns who work directly with the women.

Observations

Assessment: A Process of Understanding

Assessment is a complex, ongoing process in which the VISTA worker and the woman gradually work toward nonjudgmental understanding of the full range of the woman's life experience. The primary initial goal is to assess whether or not a woman is appropriate for VISTA services. If appropriate, then the secondary goal is to begin to understand the full context surrounding the woman's use of force to best serve her. VISTA Program assessment is a four-step process that begins when a woman makes her initial call for program services, continues with her individual intake assessment interview, evolves during her participation in the group, and ends with her final agency contact. This view of assessment—as an ongoing process—is critical to appropriately addressing a woman's use of force through contextualized education, support, and advocacy at the individual and exosystem levels.

During her initial call for services, a woman often expresses anger and disillusionment about her situation. Rather than immediately informing the woman of service goals and parameters, the VISTA worker's role is to listen. Simply listening often provides the woman an opportunity to fully express her feelings and, in return, have those feelings—and the source and extent of those feelings—validated by a professional. Since the chaos in her life began, this may be the woman's first experience having a professional listen first and ask questions later. This also sends her the message that the worker is meeting her where she is in her situation rather than imposing a framework on her. Generally, once an initial caller feels she is heard, her tone may begin to change, her anger may seem to deescalate, and she may then state her desire to receive information from the VISTA worker.

The VISTA individual intake assessment interview is the second portion of the total assessment picture. At this time, women are provided with a program overview

and then asked to complete paperwork that includes demographic information, medical history, and the Abusive Behavior Inventory (ABI). The use of language on all intake forms aids a woman's gradual understanding that the VISTA approach to her situation is usually unlike her experiences to date. For example, the terms *perpetrator* and *victim*, with which she may have become familiar through the criminal justice system, are replaced with *your information* and *partner/ex-partner information*. A woman often comments on "how much easier" it is to fill out a form when she does not feel "judged" before putting pen to paper. Filling out the final piece of paperwork, the ABI, is often a powerful portion of the intake meeting for her. This form is organized in a way that begins to contextualize her use of force. Next to categories and descriptions of force or violence, there are two columns. In one column, the woman checks off the behaviors she has used against her partner. In the column next to it, she checks off the behaviors her partner has used against her. On completing this form, she often finds her partner's behaviors exceed her own. The VISTA worker then asks the woman what motivated the behaviors she indicated on the ABI form. The discussion then facilitates understanding and often begins her identification of negative feelings, such as shame and anger. The prospective VISTA member often reveals she used force against her partner in retaliation for abuse she suffered long before the incident. In some cases, she explains, the abuse she suffered occurred in a previous relationship, where, for multiple reasons, she did not have the opportunity to explore its impact. She is then asked to fill out an additional ABI pertaining to the previous relationship. This provides her and the VISTA worker with a broader view of her life experience. Other times, she explains, her use of force was in direct response to her partner's abusive and/or controlling behaviors toward her. If she reveals that her use of force was out of physical self-defense, she is referred to the agency's Community Counseling Program on a voluntary basis. Some women, however, state that they are not survivors of domestic violence and that they believe their use of force is because of a "short fuse" or "hot temper."

Following a woman's paperwork completion, the VISTA worker learns more about the woman's situation by engaging in a conversation organized around a semistructured discussion format.⁶ Interwoven through this discussion is the VISTA worker's explanation of the possible impact the ENM's macro- and micro-level systems have had on the woman's life to date. The VISTA worker briefly discusses the gender-based messages many women receive about what is "appropriate female behavior" in a relationship. The woman will often respond by describing her frustration with expectations to be a "good girl," a "good wife," or a "good mother" in a relationship where she feels uncared for, disrespected, and unsupported. The VISTA worker then provides an overview of how these messages are especially counterproductive because they cast judgment without offering legitimate means of addressing one's anger.

During the individual intake interview, a woman usually takes full responsibility for her use of force, expresses her desire to change her behavior, and often reveals she called the police during the presenting incident. Similar to House's (2001) findings, all

VISTA members with histories of domestic violence survivorship immediately took responsibility for their use of force. Women who were not survivors of domestic violence generally admitted to use of force as well. Through this dialogue with the VISTA worker, the woman often begins to reveal possible early influences on her eventual use of force and the impact her use of force has had on multiple areas of her life. With the combination of questions asked and information provided, a woman often begins to make connections among what may have seemed like isolated incidents in her past, connections that begin to explain rather than demonize her actions.

The question that seems to elicit the most information regarding the women's use of force is, "What, if anything, was different about the presenting incident for you?" Some women have responded that the only thing different was that "this time the police came, so we got involved in the court system." In general, however, a woman responds that, although there was prior use of force between both parties, this incident was different because she felt a deeper level of disrespect from her partner than she had in the past. Perhaps her partner laughed at her, spat at her, criticized her mothering, or again refused to acknowledge her. One woman explained she used force because "he ignored me again, and this time I just didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed him and made him pay attention." VISTA Program staff observations are similar to Dasgupta's (1999) and House's (2001) findings that women have a variety of personal motives for violent behavior, including reclaiming lost self-respect, saving loved family members and pets, establishing self-identity as a tough woman, retaliating for a history of abuse, or taking preemptive measures because they believe an assault is imminent and/or because not using force in the past did not keep them safe.

Because assessment is a detailed process and because many women are, justifiably, self-protective during the individual intake assessment interview, women have been referred to the Community Counseling Program after completing the intake assessment and attending three or more group sessions. During group sessions, each woman revealed various scenarios that indicated her use of force was self-defensive. These actions include, for example, a woman scratching her partner while he was dragging her down the stairs by her hair, scratching her partner's face when he was trying to suffocate her, and living with a cycle of coercive control that has kept the woman fearful for her life should she not comply with her partner's every demand. It is interesting to note that although all of these women were told that they did not have to remain in VISTA and were free to attend voluntary groups, many chose to remain in VISTA because of the friendship bonds (Larance & Porter, 2004) they had formed with other members.

Education and Support: Context as a Tool

Education and support refers to the VISTA group process that integrates weekly session topics with one or more of the relevant ENM levels. By the cofacilitator's presenting session topics in this manner—one that resonates with VISTA members' experiences as members of society, participants in institutions, colleagues, and/or

family members—women are more receptive to learning the information and want to apply it to their daily lives. Each session follows a broad curriculum design that allows the cofacilitator to tailor the session to the needs of the women present at the time. The result of this approach is that women have the opportunity to gradually learn from, appreciate, and then honor their personal challenges as they concurrently gain knowledge from the curriculum topic and wisdom from the women in their group circle (Larance & Porter, 2004). The goals for this portion of the VISTA process—education and support—are to help women identify and then reduce the personal shame they may feel for having used force, address feelings of responsibility for having used force, and increase their awareness and use of nonforceful behaviors.

Shame and related feelings. Shame, when felt, can be a powerful and painful emotion for many women in VISTA. One woman described her feelings of shame as having “removed my breath. I can’t breathe right or look anyone in the eye anymore because I am so ashamed of what I did when I hit him. I feel debilitated.” Her feelings mirror Dasgupta’s (1999) findings that, although the women in her study felt justified for assaulting their partners, most still suffered guilt about their behavior. VISTA staff have observed how a woman’s understanding of the foundation of her shame—and possible anger—can liberate her by providing the space for her to move out of shame and toward responsibility. That understanding often begins during a particular VISTA session when women are asked to illustrate what shame means to them. Women have drawn court room scenes, a page of entirely black scribbles, a sad face with tears, a judge’s angry face, lightening bolts to denote fury, children looking on during a violent episode, self-portraits with fire in their eyes to suggest rage, or a simple crack across the page to denote a broken life.

After each woman shares her illustration and a brief description with the rest of the group, group members often comment on an obvious link between shame and anger that surfaced during individual explanations. The facilitator offers that this link may be better understood by revisiting the role the ENM macro-system level’s cultural and historical messages play in the formation of women’s perceptions of who they should be in a relationship and what happens when those perceptions are not realized. This process seems to generate shame from existing anger. For example, “Women have been led to believe that their life activities should be for others and that their main task is to make and maintain relationships—relationships that serve others” (J. B. Miller, 1991, p. 185). Thus, when a relationship falters, women often hold themselves ultimately responsible. The irony is that the relationship often falters because of women’s unaddressed anger about issues within the relationship, identified by some VISTA members as stemming from economic and social inequities between them and their partners. According to J. B. Miller (1991)

Repeated instances of suppressing the anger [in a relationship] can produce repeated experiences of frustration and inaction. The experiences of inaction and ineffectiveness

lead to feelings of weakness and lack of self-esteem, which can increase the woman's sense of feeling unworthy and inferior. Feeling more inferior and unworthy makes a person more angry. Such spiraling situations can come to fill so much of a woman's psychological "space" that she can begin to have a skewed sense of herself. She begins to feel "full of anger," which then surely seems irrational and unwarranted. All the while, this is really a false inner picture of her total psychological situation. But, very importantly, it is one that the external world—so called "reality"—is only too ready to confirm, because any anger is too much anger in women. (p. 185)

Many VISTA members address the irrationality and unwarranted feelings surrounding the anger that J. B. Miller describes, and they explain that this is what fills them with shame or the "unworthy and inferior" feelings to which J. B. Miller also refers. In turn, these VISTA members then describe feeling shameful for being angry. This vicious cycle

can end in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If the anger is finally expressed, it often appears in exaggerated form, perhaps along with screaming or yelling, or in ineffective form, with simultaneous negations and apologies, or with various other untoward accompaniments. (p. 185)

One VISTA member remarked that for 28 years of marriage she followed cultural, religious, and family expectations for her role as a wife and mother. "But then one day," she explained, "I had had enough of him and decided to fight back every opportunity he gave me. I pulled his hair, threw things at him, and really raised hell." Rather than feeling empowered by her use of force, she explained, she felt "less of a person every time" she reacted to "his irritating comments or actions." There does not seem to be positive resolution in using force, as she continued to explain that "fighting back hasn't helped me anymore than being passive did and now I feel worse about myself than I did before, so now what should I do?"

Other members disregard the suggestion that macro-level messages explain the shame and anger that resulted from their use of force. Instead, some of these women have explained that painful individual-level childhood experiences—such as unrevealed assault by a family friend or adoption as an adolescent in exchange for the family's economic well-being—initiated their lifelong tendency to confuse feeling ashamed with feeling angry. VISTA members who have the opportunity to deconstruct early childhood memories in light of their current incidents are often able to understand how unaddressed experiences, thoughts, and feelings motivate adult choices and encourage and/or increase shameful feelings for those choices. This realization gives women the opportunity to tap into existing strength by moving out of shame, beyond anger, and toward responsibility for acknowledging and then expressing their anger in a more appropriate manner. On her completion, the court-ordered woman whose description of shame introduced this section described VISTA as a "healing place" that provided her the opportunity to "journey out of shame and come to a place where that shame was no longer useful."

Responsibility. Responsibility, as generally defined by VISTA members in multiple group settings, is an internal feeling a woman has when she realizes she chose to use certain actions against her partner and then followed through with those actions without acting in physical self-defense. VISTA members are encouraged to name and then own their emotions, behaviors, and the actions that resulted from them. Because of women's socialization, addressing the concept of responsibility is a delicate process, especially with a group of women who may have been victimized and/or are currently in chaotic relationships. There is the risk that, if done in an inappropriate manner, encouraging responsibility will be translated by some women into reason to further shame themselves for their actions in an unworkable, chaotic, or even violent relationship. For example, a woman may express, "I know it's all my fault because I hit him!" rather than ask herself, "Why did I choose to retaliate?" and "What is happening in the relationship that makes me want to fight back?" Many VISTA members take responsibility for the entire incident, including responsibility for the role their partner played. This is certainly not VISTA's goal. But their tendency to do so is natural, the group facilitator explains, when considering the cultural and societal messages women receive about their relationship maintenance role. Having failed to maintain peace, these women often believe the incident and consequences are entirely their fault. For these women and other group members, group is an opportunity to reduce their burden by first honoring their ability to navigate and survive within the relationship and then, gradually, to identify the nature of their role in the altercation.

The benefit of encouraging responsibility—if done supportively, nonjudgmentally, and proactively—for the consequences of their use of force is that women can begin to feel less like passive, dependent agents and more like empowered (Gutierrez, 1990), skilled individuals able to navigate a relationship in a manner that serves them over the short and long term. Some women in VISTA blame their partners for "making them" use force. These women typically eschew identification with macro-level messages pertaining to a woman's role. Instead, they explain feeling enmeshed in the micro-system level or the daily interactions with their intimate partner that eventually and regularly lead to their use of force. One woman shared she flew into rages on finding that her husband loaded the dishwasher wrong or had not drained the children's bathwater. Her rages were, she explained, "his fault! If he wasn't so annoying I would not have to fight back." After multiple sessions and detailed exploration of her childhood, she revealed unresolved issues with her father, feeling disrespected and unheard throughout her childhood. She gradually connected the anger expressed toward her husband with the unresolved anger she felt toward her father but had never felt safe enough to express. Eventually understanding and then taking responsibility for her feelings and behaviors, she explained, helped her create a new life without using force.

Each VISTA member participates in a session that specifically encourages her exploration of the payoffs and costs, both short and long term, of having used force

in her relationship. For some women, this is the first step in critically and nonjudgmentally exploring their actions' consequences. VISTA staff have observed that women who use force who share the payoffs of their aggression in the company of other women who have used force feel validated because, in the words of one woman, "it reassured me that I wasn't crazy . . . They are good people and 'lost it' [too], so I know that I am still a good person." Often women laugh and share sighs of relief or knowing glances at hearing what others believe to have been beneficial about a behavioral choice that forever changed their lives. Short-term payoffs of using force have been described as: releasing years of anger all at once; giving him what was coming to him; feeling vindicated, better, strong, important, heard; finally "shocking the hell out of him"; and having "him finally listen to me." Similarly, long-term payoffs have been described as: "permanently turning the tables because now he never really knows what I'll do next"; "our relationship is better now because we both got help after hitting bottom"; "getting out of the relationship because I realized what it was doing to me"; and "coming to VISTA."

In contrast, VISTA staff have observed that women do not share laughter when describing the costs of having used force. But they do share audible sighs and knowing glances. Their lists of short- and long-term costs of having used force are intermingled and shorter than the benefits. But the costs seem to have penetrated their lives in a way the benefits did not. The costs women have shared include: exorbitant court or legal costs; having a record; sadness for "damaging" the family; and feeling shame, guilt, stigmatized, sad, self-disgust, that he won, it made everything worse, and more isolated. Through this exploration of payoffs and costs, women also participate in a parallel process of taking responsibility. One woman stated the payoffs "just didn't pay off because the rest was just so bad. If I could have just walked away, I could have saved myself so much heartache."

Increasing nonforceful behaviors. VISTA Program staff believe that any woman who is using non-self-defensive force in her intimate relationship is putting herself and those close to her at risk for further harm. But VISTA staff have observed that these women used force because they felt they lacked other options and a long-term view of what the impact of that use of force may be. This observation highlights Osthoff's (2002) point, "Practitioners need to give battered women the resources they need. . . . These resources may increase women's options. Perhaps with more options, women will be less likely to use violence" (p. 1537). Similar to Barnett, Lee, and Thelen's (1997) findings, VISTA Program staff have observed that VISTA members' (i.e., survivors and those without a domestic violence history) use of retaliatory force often escalates an already tense situation and makes the women more vulnerable to their partner's aggression. It does not seem to control or improve the immediate situation or the long-term relationship dynamic. Many women have shared that they used force because they felt they "didn't know what else to do." In one woman's words, "I had taken the emotional stuff for so long! I was really fed up

so I just exploded!" None of the women served in the VISTA Program believes her partner is afraid of her. In fact, most women report their partners "simply laugh" at them when they respond forcefully. All of the women also report they are not afraid of their partner's physical assaults but, in some cases, fear the power their partners may have to manipulate the legal system or the child protective services against the women's interests.

Before a woman can be receptive to learning more options, it is necessary for her to first explore the ENM's individual level, namely how conflict was addressed in her family of origin. For example, when she was angry as a child, was she sent to her room and told "not to come out until she was presentable," or was she provided the opportunity to articulate her feelings in a respectful manner? The first directive sends the message that she needs to keep her anger to herself, out of public view, and does not encourage introspection. In contrast, the second opportunity provides her a foundation for attaining tools that will enable her to gradually express herself in a constructive manner. Similarly, how did her caregivers express their anger toward each other? Did they yell and throw objects, or did they argue constructively and nonthreateningly with resolution? Without role models and skill-building experiences as children, women do not have a secure foundation for appropriately addressing anger, an emotion that seems to be universally condemned in women.

In the process of becoming receptive to and then incorporating alternative behaviors into their daily lives, each woman's analysis of her relationship's dynamics (the ENM's micro-system level) is critical because those dynamics may initially prevent her from considering alternative behaviors. For example, encouraging a woman to take a time-out when she feels the situation escalating may not be an option she is willing to consider because of the implied meaning a time-out may have in her particular situation. During their first few weeks in the program, many VISTA members share they would not want to take a time-out because they are sure it would signal to their partners that they are: "afraid of them now," "backing down," "want to lose this time," "not strong anymore," "just there to get kicked around," or "not equal in the relationship anymore."

From their first contact with the program, women are warned against drastically and instantly changing their behavior because of the relationship risk in which it may put them. By raising their consciousness about the current state of the relationship and balancing it with an awareness of how their particular situation would change should they suddenly change their behaviors, women are better able to protect themselves. This awareness becomes a part of each woman's safety plan. As their time in VISTA progresses, members have the opportunity to repeatedly question the payoffs and costs of maintaining existing relationship dynamics. In this process, the women brainstorm alternative behaviors they view as workable. The list includes: "journaling," "going shopping," "exercising," "leaving the house," "going to a friend's house," "calling the JBWS helpline," "going outside and screaming," "going for a long drive," "focusing on my actions rather than his actions," and "going for a walk."

Many women report that although taking a time-out took practice, it worked because it gave them the opportunity to “cool off” and not say and/or do something “in the moment” they would later regret. When women report taking a time-out or introducing an alternative behavior into their daily lives, it is not unusual to hear a round of applause from all present. For some, the use of structured sentences introduced in VISTA sessions—When you (name partner’s action), I feel (name own emotion); I would prefer (name a more respectful behavior)—gradually changes both how the women choose to respond and how their partners treat them. Some women have indicated that these structured sentences allow them to “own their feelings” while remaining respectful of their partners.

Advocacy

When battered women use violence, police, prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys all need to know more about the women’s experiences of battering. Without this information, none of these practitioners will be able to appropriately respond to the women who come before them. (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1534)

Toward this end, VISTA staff provide micro- and macro-level advocacy.

VISTA’s micro-level advocacy efforts include working directly with referring agencies and survivors when women who are referred for VISTA services are assessed to be survivors of domestic violence who responded in physical self-defense. Most women in this situation have been referred by the court after an inappropriate dual arrest, whereas others have been referred for making a statement to the prosecutor that the incident was mutual to protect their abusers. In this case, a VISTA staff member discusses the assessment outcome with the woman and explains that although VISTA contextualizes a woman’s use of force, because of her history and self-defensive actions, she would be better served in the agency’s Community Counseling Program. The VISTA Program manager then writes a detailed letter to the referring agency explaining the assessment outcome and recommending that the woman cease VISTA participation and voluntarily seek survivor’s counseling. These letters have been used by VISTA as tools for education and advocacy. By clearly explaining the program’s assessment to the court, VISTA staff are able to make recommendations for appropriate action. These letters have resulted in reduced or eliminated jail time, a woman’s participation in voluntary victim’s rather than VISTA services, and/or having charges dropped.

Micro-level advocacy efforts also extend to survivors who have been referred to VISTA for using non-self-defensive force. When these women complete the program, the VISTA Program manager discusses with them the possibility that they may benefit from voluntary survivor’s counseling. All of these women have shown interest. Contained in their completion letter to the referring agency—and first verified by the women—is a detailed history of their abuse by their partners or former

partners, an overview of VISTA participation, and the recommendation that they voluntarily seek survivor's counseling.

Macro-level VISTA advocacy includes local and state trainings. The VISTA Program staff provided one agency-based training for domestic violence program staff and community clinicians focused on lessons learned from VISTA members, provided portions of three NJCBW-based trainings, and provided one NJCBW conference presentation addressing women who use force. Those invited to both local and state-level trainings included police officers, private practitioners, advocates, child protective services workers, and members of the criminal justice system. VISTA staff learned that dialogue at this level is critical to educating others about the intricacies of each woman's experiences and how those experiences influenced her motivation and intent to use force against her partner. It is also critical for creating mutual understanding among those assisting women who use force. Question and answer sessions during and after these presentations have brought all involved a clearer understanding of the immediate and long-term needs of women who use force. Having the opportunity to answer a police officer's question, "Well, then what should I do at the scene of an incident?" or an attorney's inquiry, "What other questions can I ask her before trial?" is a pivotal experience for everyone involved and ultimately serves the best interests of the women who use force.

Conclusion

Appropriately serving women who use force seems to be a natural progression of the anti-domestic violence movement, one that espouses a general feminist ideal of women helping women regardless of their circumstances. Creating a safe place for women who use force—whether a separate program or the opportunity to address use of force in a survivors group setting—can be a critical part of extensive assessment, education and support, and advocacy that is essential to the lives of these women who find themselves without alternatives. Advocates and practitioners must continue to confront this difficult issue by broadening their understanding of the full context of women's use of force while concurrently exploring the most appropriate ways for their agencies to directly assist women who use force. Ideally, this approach will gradually provide a framework for serving women who use force in a manner they justly deserve.

Notes

1. Jersey Battered Women's Services's Abuse Ceases Today (ACT) Program serves men who are perpetrators and survivors of domestic violence. The difference in demand for ACT versus VISTA services is a reflection of the differences between men's and women's use of violence or force. For example, the ACT Program runs 11 groups a week for male batterers, with approximately 12 men per group. ACT

served more than 435 male batterers and two male victims in 2003. The VISTA Program, in contrast, has one woman who use force group a week that serves approximately five women at a time.

2. The Community Counseling Program is a nonresidential program that serves women in the community who have histories of domestic violence survivorship or are currently in abusive relationships.

3. VISTA's group topics address the dynamics of anger, communication skills, threatening and controlling behaviors, definitions of abuse, costs and benefits of using force and being violent, shame and responsibility, the progression of force, negative self-talk, time-outs, impact of force on family and friends, and spirituality.

4. For more information on a well-established program that also serves mandated women who have used force in intimate relationships—The CrossRoads Program—refer to the Duluth Abuse Intervention Project at www.duluth-model.org.

5. VISTA groups are led by an experienced, master's-level counselor and cofacilitated by a trained volunteer.

6. This semistructured format entails questions that address: the woman's family of origin, previous relationships, the status of her early relationship with her partner or ex-partner, details about the presenting incident, strengths of the relationship, whether or not she fears her partner or he fears her, how the presenting incident was different for her from other incidents, her current support system, and her goals for program participation.

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In Her Own Words: Women Describe Their Use of Force Resulting in Court-Ordered Intervention

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Abstract

Although researchers and practitioners have established that men and women use force in their intimate heterosexual relationships for very different reasons, there is a dearth of information regarding the events that surrounds women's arrests and subsequent court orders to anti-violence intervention programming. This information is fundamental to improving Criminal Legal System (CLS) and community-partner understanding of and response to intimate partner violence (IPV). The authors meet this need by analyzing 208 women's descriptions of their arrests and subsequent court order to intervention programs for using force. From these, the authors frame nine categorical descriptions of women's actions. The descriptions and categories highlight areas for CLS and community-partners' growing understanding of this complex issue.

Keywords

domestic violence, women's use of force

Introduction

Women can and do use violence: Globally and domestically, they have been leaders and participants in political revolutions, protests against the state, acts of terrorism, and gang violence. Women have committed acts of abuse against children, the elderly, their male partners in heterosexual relationships, and their female partners in lesbian relationships (Dasgupta, 2002; Miller, 2005; Pence, 2012). Thus, there is not a

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question of whether or not women are capable of general and interpersonal acts of violence. Researchers and practitioners have well established that men and women use force in their intimate heterosexual relationships, but for very different reasons (Dasgupta, 2002; Larance, 2006, 2007; Larance & Miller, 2015; Saunders, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2002).

In this article, the authors take a closer look at 208 women's reasons for their use of force through the women's descriptions of events surrounding their arrests and subsequent court orders and other mandates¹ to anti-violence intervention programming. This information, from the words of women enrolled in violence intervention programs, is missing from the literature, yet fundamental to the evolving Criminal Legal System (CLS)² and community-partner understanding of and response to IPV. It is also a cornerstone of nuanced contextual research and ongoing innovations to community-based anti-violence programming. The women's answers to the query, "Please describe the actions that brought you to programming," were gathered from intervention program intake interview documentation and hand-written questionnaires. From the women's descriptions of the events surrounding their arrest, court order and/or mandate to programming, the authors' frame nine inductive and deductive categorical descriptions of their actions. The women's descriptions, and resulting categories, highlight areas for CLS and community-partners' growing understanding of and improved responses to this complex issue, as well as opportunities for further research and anti-violence as well as survivor support program innovation.

Background

Current criminal justice polices across the United States, designed to take IPV more seriously and stop treating offenders with impunity, have resulted in the increased arrest of women who are domestic and sexual violence survivors (Chesney-Lind, 2002; Goodmark, 2008). This unintentional turn of events is one in which police and prosecutors were especially under pressure to treat IPV as a crime deserving of attention; on the cultural front, the emphasis for change was to communicate that using violence to control, intimidate, or over-power one's partner would no longer be tolerated (Schechter, 1982). Following successful civil suits launched against police departments that failed to arrest IPV offenders was research reinforcing this action, particularly a study conducted in Minneapolis that demonstrated police arrest was a stronger deterrent to future IPV than traditional mediation or separation practices (Sherman & Berk, 1984).

Buoyed by this success, and prior to the dissemination of other domestic violence (DV)³ arrest replication studies funded by the National Institute of Justice that failed to replicate the Minneapolis findings (Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1989; Hirschel, Hutchinson, Dean, Kelley, & Pesackie, 1990; Pate, Hamilton, & Annan, 1991; see generally Sherman, 1992), mandatory and pro-arrest policies became commonplace across the country. There was concern from the beginning that women from minority and economically disadvantaged communities would especially bear the brunt of this policy change (Miller, 1989; Richie, 2000). Concomitantly, although more male

offenders were arrested, women with survivorship histories were also swept up in the increased arrests (Haviland, Frye, Rajah, Thukral, & Trinity, 2001; Henning & Feder, 2004; Rajan & McCloskey, 2007).

This net widening reflects the consequence of a gender-neutral arrest policy for IPV that ignores context: specifically, motivation, consequences, and injury involved. Work transpiring since new arrest policies became institutionalized and commonplace has unequivocally demonstrated that vast differences exist vis-à-vis the reasons men and women use force in relationships (Dasgupta, 2002), and that the incident-driven CLS largely does not consider the complexities of women's use of force in intimate relationships, thus criminalizing victimization (Miller, 2001; Klein, 2004). As McMahan and Pence (2003) point out, ". . . the arrests of women for domestic violence tell us more about the complexities of criminalizing domestic violence than they do about women's use of violence" (p. 63).

Barring an understanding of women's use of force, police have arrested women with long victimization histories who use force in self-defense against their abusers (O'Dell, 2009). Trained to respond to criminal violations, police arrest and often assume any issues will be resolved at the prosecutorial charging stage, as indicated by police officers during a ride-along component of research reported in Miller's (2005) work: "I don't go there to figure out what happened. I don't care what happened. My job is to decide whether or not a criminal act occurred and if so, what criminal act and who committed it" and "I don't look at it that deeply. They teach us to just look at the surface. What do you see here and how and who. I can't go into that other life stuff with them. We are just a Band-Aid" (pp. 75-76). By the time this happens, however, even if prosecutors recognize the women arrested were victims responding in self-defense, the effects of arrest are already consequential.

Following their arrest, women typically find themselves in a court system where their tendency to detail every aspect of their "wrong-doing" only contributes to the punitive measures taken against them (Larance, 2007; Miller, 2005). Women who have survivorship histories—mystified about their arrest, frightened of going to jail, and not knowing what would happen to their children—often take "a deal" (i.e., plead guilty in exchange for a mandated treatment program and not having to stay in jail overnight; Miller, 2005) they interpret as setting them free to care for their children and also untethering them from a trial system that would cost them money they do not have.⁴ The result has been and continues to be that many women who fought back against their abusive partners now have a violent criminal record that directly affects future child custody, employment, immigration status, native women's right to be on tribal land, and housing prospects.

After arrest and a guilty plea, women in many jurisdictions are then court ordered to intervention as a condition of their probation (Larance & Rousson, 2016; Miller, 2005; Osthoff, 2002; Worcester, 2002). Ironically, it is Batterer Intervention Program (BIP) facilitators, skilled in providing services for men who abuse their partners, who have been tasked with accommodating the influx of women with survivorship histories now court ordered to intervention (Larance, 2006; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). In short, they are expected to "add women and stir" (Chesney-Lind, 1988).

Court-ordering women with survivorship histories to BIP's—programs designed to address male battering behavior—has challenged advocate-BIP facilitator relationships across communities. Although there is a mutual desire to “do-no-harm” while reducing IPV, there are conflicting ideas about how court-ordered programming can accomplish that goal (Dasgupta, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Larance & Rousson, 2016; Worcester, 2002). But given that force has been used, regardless of the motivation, support and intervention are needed. Innovative services grounded in a “healing place” philosophy—distinctly different from BIPs—that encourage accountability and non-violent options are promising (Covington, 2014; Dieten, Jones, & Rondon, 2014; Larance, 2006; Larance, Hoffman-Ruzicka, & Shivas, 2009; Pence, Connelly, & Scaia, 2011).

At the Intersection

Culture (Bui & Morash, 1999; Yoshihama, 1999), economics (Brush, 2011), and the diversity of women's experiences shape institutional responses to their behavior. For marginalized women, these intersecting realities (Crenshaw, 1991) often dramatically increase the likelihood that they will be criminalized for their use of force against abusive partners. Women of color are particularly at risk of arrest (Potter, 2008; Richie, 1996, 2012; Sokoloff, 2005; West, 2002, 2009), as are South Asian immigrant women (Dasgupta, 1999, 2002; Roy, 2012), those who are physically disabled (Ballan & Freyer, 2012), and women who identify as lesbian (Ristock, 2002). Likewise, women consuming alcohol at the time of a violent incident are more likely than their intoxicated male partners to be identified by police as the primary perpetrators (Hester, 2012). Bringing attention to this “gendered injustice” (Renzetti, 1999) is a fundamental aspect of understanding and effectively addressing women's use of force.

Intervention

As an arrested violence-involved woman makes her way through the CLS labyrinth, she often finds that her survivorship history is not considered relevant to her situation (Goodmark, 2008; Richie, 2015). For African American women, there is the added dimension of being placed within the framework of White middle-class women's experiences; in short, “add women of color and stir” (Potter, 2008). In other words, knowledge of a woman's relationship history and cultural considerations are essential to providing effective, gender-responsive, trauma-informed (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004; Gilfus, 1999) services that are culturally competent and, therefore, tailored to women's diverse needs (Larance, 2006; Larance & Rousson, 2016). However, many intervention providers struggle with the ethical implications of providing court-ordered services to women who are often abused themselves (Gardner, 2007). Others may also be unaware of how to provide gender-informed intervention services to these women in a manner that encourages accountability for the actions used, addresses possible trauma histories, and emphasizes non-forceful alternatives to navigating their relationships.

Intervention providers and the court-ordered women find themselves in a catch-22 situation: Programming provides anti-violence information and alternatives to court-ordered women but women must attend the groups or they will be in violation of probation. Therefore, it is imperative that programming be designed with a clear understanding of the complex dynamics of women's use of force in terms of how the motivation, intent, and impact largely differs from that of men who use violence against women. It is that understanding that provides the space where women can receive the information, integrate it into their daily lives, and increase their violence-free interactions (Larance & Rousson, 2016). Understanding how women identify the situation that brought them to programming is central to improving CLS response, intervention, and research in this area.

Words Matter

Language defines how we see ourselves and often how others see us. For women who have experienced domestic abuse and violence at the hands of their intimate partners, and then used force against those or subsequent partners, language presents multiple challenges at arrest, in the courtroom, when seeking services, and during intervention. At the time of arrest, women are more likely than men to detail what they have done, than what has been done to them. This contributes to the likelihood that they will be arrested instead of or in addition to the men who have abused them. Goodmark (2008) points out that in the courtroom, there is an expected narrative and presentation to which women must conform if they want to achieve a just outcome. In the Duluth coordinated community approach to achieving justice, Asmus (2004) offers the rationale for prosecutorial differences in treatment of criminal charges for assault against a batterer and for assault charges against a battered woman: They are inappropriate when viewed within the larger cultural context which recognizes the different reasons and consequences of the use of force.

Similarly, battered women's shelter help-line volunteers, the frontline gatekeepers for services, often refuse entry to women seeking shelter because the women neither embrace "victim" language nor do they identify as fearing their partners (Larance, 2015). Some women's advocates do not see it as their role to work with women who have used force (Dichter, 2013; McMahon & Pence, 2003), whereas others struggle with the reality that "someone's abuse is not the central meaning-making incident in their lives" (Lamb, 1999, p. 113). As Lamb (1999) points out, women with survivorship histories who have used force often do not identify with a "victim" category because that category is "too lofty"; it suggests they have survived against all odds, when many women perceive themselves as simply trying to get through their day (Larance, 2012). This rejection is also due to socio-cultural messages harnessing women's belief that because they have endured the abuse, they have been weak, and weakness is shameful.⁵

By the time a woman meets with a court-ordered intervention provider, she has learned that her use of force, often in the midst of her abuse, is what now defines her above all else. Thus, language becomes a critical tool in allowing her to author her

own experience and move forward. To this end, the term “use of force” is used among feminist, context-based practitioners and researchers to emphasize that her actions were used as an attempt to gain short-term control of chaotic, abusive relationship dynamics (Dasgupta, 2002). Whereas “battering” indicates the ability to establish and maintain power and control throughout the course of the relationship (Schechter, 1982; Stark, 2007), the establishment and maintenance of which are often independent of any violence. Coercive control, rather than violence, is what gives one individual battering another the ability to gradually erode an individual’s personhood (Stark, 2007), without ever breaking the law. This ability, Anderson (2009) points out, is fundamentally gendered given the entitlement culturally, historically, and systematically possessed by men. West (2009) expands upon this from a cultural perspective explaining, “Black women’s use of force occurs within the context of gender inequality in which their aggression lacks the same meaning and impact as their male partner’s violence” (p. 93). Swan and Snow’s (2003) work found that Black women who had assaulted their partners, sometimes severely enough to cause injuries, had mental health problems as a result of the abuse, and generally lacked the power to use coercive control to terrorize and/or subjugate their male partners. This kind of power is not something women typically have access to, according to Pence and Dasgupta (2006):

While it is not unusual for a woman to use violence in her intimate relationship, it is exceptional for her to achieve the kind of dominance over her male partner that characterizes battering. Social conditions, which do not condone women’s use of violence, patterns of socialization, as well as the typical physical disparities between the male and female of the species, make the woman “batterer” an anomaly. (p. 6)

Women participating in group support and intervention programming often point out that when they have tried to establish control by over-turning furniture or throwing objects, for example, their abusive partners have simply laughed at them and then escalated the violence against them.⁶ Similarly, Swan, Gambone, Lee Van Horn, Snow, and Sullivan’s (2012) findings of women who used physical aggression against their male partners, reported greater victimization of the women. Their work points out that gender differences in physical strength interact with women’s victimization and use of force against their intimate partners.

Gendered Actions

The issue of women’s use of force in intimate heterosexual relationships has been explored from the perspective of whether or not women’s use of force is equivalent to men’s in terms of blow-for-blow actions. Despite extensive contextually based research demonstrating that women’s use of force is not equivalent to men’s battering tactics (see Hamby, 2014) and the types of threats differ greatly (Goetting, 1999), critics utilizing quantitative surveys and/or large samples using checklists void of context continue to assert otherwise (Archer, 2000; Straus, 2014). However, that conversation will not be replicated in this article, as this work utilizes qualitative data rather than quantitative checklists.

Several earlier efforts to better comprehend and understand women's use of force have guided our own conceptualizations of categorical development. Pence and Dasgupta (2002) theorize five possible categories for violence perpetrated against intimate partners: battering, resistive/reactive violence, situational violence, pathological violence, and anti-social violence. Within the resistive/reactive category, the authors explain that the major goals for survivors are to (a) escape and/or stop the violence and (b) establish parity in the relationship. Using interview data with a community sample of 108 women⁷ mostly recruited from an inner-city health clinic, who used physical violence against a male intimate partner, Swan and Snow (2002) develop four typologies of women's violence: 34% of the women were classified as victims (with 19% of these designated as "Type A victims, in which the partner committed more of all types of violence than the woman committed against him, including moderate violence and/or emotional abuse [19% of the sample]; and Type B victims, in which the partner committed greater levels of severe violence and coercion, but the women committed more moderate violence and/or emotional abuse [15%]); and only 12% of the women were classified as aggressors" (pp. 301-302). Johnson (2005) conducts secondary analyses of Frieze's (1983) data from married couples in Pittsburgh in the 1970s and develops four general types of violence: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, mutual violent control, and situational couple violence; women are more likely to be victims of intimate terrorism (husbands engage in this 97% of time compared with wives' 3%) but wives fit into the violent resistance category when using force against their abusive partners (96% of wives use violent resistance compared with 4% of husbands; see also Johnson & Leone's, 2005, study using data from the National Violence Against Women Survey; Johnson, et al., 2014). Miller (2005), using primary data collected from 95 women in one state's intervention program developed specifically for women who use force in relationships, finds three categories that best capture the women's actions: (a) generalized violence (5%)—women violent with strangers, neighbors, partners, and so forth; (b) defensive violence (65%)—women who used violence defensively, trying to get away during a violent incident or trying to leave to avoid violence. Typically, male partners were first to use violence. When women perceived their children were in danger because of men's violence, they acted aggressively to make their partners stop—so force used by women was in response to either an initial harm or a threat to them or their children; (c) frustration response ("end-of-her-rope"; 30%)—women who did not initiate the use of force, but responded aggressively when nothing else seemed to stop their partners' behavior; many had known histories of violence.

Finally, Valli's (2007) work on resistance, called "edgework," highlights some women's intentional behavior "behind the scenes" of the relationship, which is strategically meant to "set the record straight" between her and her abusive partner. He has physically abused her in the past and she has learned that responding outright with force puts her in greater danger in this relationship. Therefore, by engaging in "behind the scenes" actions against him—such as purposely wrinkling his freshly dry-cleaned shirts that he believes are ready to be worn to the next morning's board meeting—she is able to maintain some measure of control of the relationship, if only from her perspective. The edgework is intended to inadvertently aid in damaging him, his work, his

image, his belongings, his extended relationships, but if confronted by him, she can easily attribute the damage to something other than herself.

With this in mind, our challenge was to explore women's narratives that explained what actions resulted in their arrest, brought them to group support and intervention programming, and to then determine whether or not the deductive categories in the research adequately encompass the range of women's experiences using force, using a larger and more racially/ethnically diverse sample.

Method and Analysis

Because women's use of force is particularly complex given relationship dynamics, motivation, intent, and impact of the actions used, we begin with a case study: RyAnn's⁸ story.

RyAnn attended one of the intervention programs in this study and is included in the 208 women's descriptions that were analyzed. Her description of the events that brought her to programming illustrates the complexity of this issue as well as the need for informed intervention. When RyAnn, an African American woman, was a member of the military she was arrested for beating her husband, Jerome, in their apartment. She had purposefully boobie-trapped their home to prevent Jerome from escaping. Once ordered to services, the intervention provider saw this as a "unique" situation and encouraged RyAnn and Jerome to meet together for counseling.⁹ She then explained to RyAnn, in front of Jerome, that RyAnn was the "batterer" in the relationship. How? By using the Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993) to point out that the actions RyAnn used against Jerome are shown on this tool as battering tactics. The intervention provider did not convey the message that the Power and Control Wheel was developed by battered women to detail abuse perpetrated against them by their male partners, and lacks the necessary context to be useful when confronting women with their use of force. The intervention provider's actions are also problematic because she did not probe further about RyAnn's relationship history. If she had, RyAnn would have had the opportunity to explain that since their marriage, Jerome had drug RyAnn behind their car, beaten her with a metal pole until she was partially deaf, and countless other incidents in an effort to "remind" her who was in control and what would happen if she did not submit to that control. Days before the presenting incident, RyAnn asked Jerome, "Does the fact that I fight back let you know that I'm not gonna take it?" Jerome replied, "You're just like an untamed animal. I'm gonna tame you." These details do not excuse RyAnn's use of force. They do, however, dramatically inform the course of intervention.

The night before the incident RyAnn learned that Jerome was having an affair. She saw no other option but to challenge his coercive control and infidelity by boobie-trapping the apartment and then, when confronted by him, attempting to beat Jerome. RyAnn later explained, in a different intervention setting, that she had "lived through all of the hell" in the relationship and was not going to passively stand by while another woman was getting what RyAnn felt she deserved after all of the abuse: harmony and love. RyAnn needed to learn alternative ways of expressing herself that did not include

violence. But is RyAnn a batterer in need of batterer's intervention? What happened during and after the incident is instructive. Jerome grabbed RyAnn and beat her until a neighbor called for an ambulance. "When the police were there," RyAnn remembers, "I felt I had to fill in the gaps but it turned into them thinking I was telling on myself. The police didn't care." The police arrested RyAnn due to her voluntary admission that she boobie-trapped the house and hit him first this time. It is important to note that at the time of arrest, the officers have the opportunity to decide whether a woman who has used force is a batterer (often defined as a primary aggressor) who uses violence as one of many power and control tactics over her partner and, therefore, should be arrested; someone who is engaged in self-defensive actions and should not be arrested; or an individual occupying a space where further distinctions need to be made, which may or may not result in arrest.

This "space for distinction" is largely comprised of women like RyAnn who use non-self-defensive force to navigate their partner's abusive behavior. After hospitalization, Jerome began stalking her and threatening RyAnn's life. Because Jerome would not stop stalking and threatening her, even when surrounded by his superior officers who were cognizant of his violence at home, RyAnn fled to another state. Despite the intensity and breadth of RyAnn's experiences with this man, RyAnn believed the intervention worker who labeled RyAnn as a "batterer" because she indeed had used force. RyAnn acknowledges that she broke the law and physically hurt Jerome. Her actions, however, did not put Jerome in fear or her in control of the relationship. Instead, her aggression escalated Jerome's violence against her. In RyAnn's words, "I made it harder on myself by fighting back because he just beat me more." RyAnn's actions were motivated by her desire to restore her dignity while hoping to establish her own autonomy. She wanted the violence and infidelity to stop and chose force as a last resort. Ideally, intervention would provide RyAnn the opportunity to explore her relationship history as she addressed the shame she felt for using force, while also exploring non-forceful options to assert her dignity. The next section details our analysis using the women's narratives.

Women's words and daily life experiences are important for both contextual understanding and because they occur and are interpreted within a gendered, patriarchal context that often trivializes or disregards diversity of experience. In using their narratives, we follow Smith's (1989) feminist standpoint theory in that the women themselves can best see and understand their world, particularly given their position of marginalization by the CLS and in relation to dominant positions of White, male privilege (Harding, 1987).

The authors' professional positions provided opportunities to connect with service providers conducting work with women court ordered to IPV treatment programs in two states. As part of the service providers' program, trained social workers coordinated the intake materials and case notes for the program participants. The data set used in this present study was constructed by using these summaries, which were either transcribed verbatim during intake assessments or copied from women's written summaries. Specifically, the program participants were asked to respond verbally or in writing to the query, "Please describe the actions that brought you to programming."

Table 1. Categories.

	Asserting Dignity	Self- Defense	Aggressive Use of Force	Anticipatory	Both Use Force	Edgework	False Accusations	Partner Self- Inflicts	Horizontal Hostility	Grand total
Grand total	79	61	2	8	1	4	32	4	17	208

Over a period of 6 months, data from 288 women were compiled, representing two different regions (the Midwest and East Coast) from two separate intervention programs. However, 208 women’s cases were finally analyzed given that they fit the criteria for having been court ordered to intervention. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine women’s victimization experiences across their life course, more than 75% of the women identified survivorship histories that involved their current or past partner. We began by sorting the women’s descriptions, both from practitioner case notes and the women’s written summaries, about the actions that resulted in their arrest and then referral to programming to deduce categories present in the existing literature and mentioned earlier in this article. After we separately coded 40 cases from Sites A and B, we compared results and refined categories, adding new categories when at least three case descriptions did not “fit” into existing categories, and expanding definitions when there were subtleties exposed that provided more information but not enough of a difference to create a new category. This began an iterative process in which we went back to the original 40 cases and re-coded, based on the refined categories. Approximately, 53% of the sample fit neatly into those categories but did not fit with other women’s narratives. Five new themes emerged that more clearly captured the women’s experiences and four themes confirmed categories used in previous work; in total, nine deductively and inductively derived categories (Table 1), with 208 women, convey¹⁰ the range of women’s experiences. The deductive categories are derived from extant research that designates women’s use of force using similar categories.¹¹ They include Aggressive Use of Force, Anticipatory, Both Use Force, and Self-Defense. The inductive categories include Asserting Dignity, Edgework, False Accusations, Partner Self-Inflicts Injuries, and Horizontal Hostility. We then added three additional coders who went back to code the 40 cases and then expand to code the full sample. One of the additional coders was a graduate intern in an IPV intervention program, whereas the other two members of the research team were university honors students trained in this methodology. All five coders independently assessed and coded each woman’s descriptions using the emergent categories. When there was disagreement, discussion ensued until a resolution was reached; sometimes this entailed looking at the case file for additional information. Ultimately, 96% interrater reliability was achieved between the five coders. The total sample (Table 2) is very diverse in terms of race, ethnicity,¹² and age. The youngest woman was 17,¹³ whereas the oldest woman was 66 years old; 84% of the women indicated having children.

As stated, the initial analysis of 288 women’s responses to “Please describe the actions that brought you to programming,” yielded 13 categories. However, four of the

Table 2. Data Set by Racial Breakdown.

	Asserting Dignity	Self-Defense	Aggressive Use of Force	Anticipatory	Both Use Force	Edgework	False Accusations	Partner Self-Inflicts	Horizontal Hostility	Grand total
African American	27	26		2		2	6		8	71
Caucasian	45	33	2	4	1	2	22	4	9	122
Other women of color	7	2		2			4			15
Grand total	79	61	2	8	1	4	32	4	17	208

categories (using force against someone other than an intimate partner [59], using force against a lesbian partner [16], referred by someone other than the CLS [four], and voluntarily enrolled [one]) were beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, the final analysis included 208 women comprising nine substantive categories including (Table 1) Asserting Dignity, Self-Defense, Aggressive Use of Force, Anticipatory, Both Using Force, Edgework, False Accusations, Partner Self-Inflicts Injuries, and Horizontal Hostility. Table 2 displays categories by race.

Findings

To illustrate the nine categories detailing the experiences of 208 women, we provide a description of each category followed by an example in the women's words. Seventy-nine of the women's descriptions of their incident are defined as "Asserting Dignity." Practitioners have observed that women describe using "self-defense," during intake assessments and group sessions in multiple ways that do not meet the legal criteria for "self-defense." Therefore, the term "defense of self" is used during some intervention groups to denote women's attempts to protect the essence of who they are rather than be confused with the legal terminology of self-defense (Larance & Rousson, 2016). The term "Asserting Dignity" builds upon these observations. Asserting Dignity is defined here as women seeking autonomy by using non-self-defensive force in the midst of batterers' ongoing demonstrations of coercive control. By doing so, women are resorting to actions, typically against the law, meant to show their partners, "Stop! I have had enough!" His actions that precipitated her use of force, however, may be coercively controlling (Stark, 2007) and, therefore, not punishable as a crime. This category captures the women's stated desires and subsequent actions to regain self-respect. Women in this category take action because they feel a level of disrespect that violates the essence of who they are as people. For example, Donna explains,

My ex-partner had been harassing me and down my back for some time, in front of my daughter, while I was dropping her off for a Wednesday night visit. So as he was down my back calling me terrible names I turned around and threw my keys at his face as a "stop" method. He called the cops on me and I was arrested an hour later. Lesson: Never let a man get you out of character!!

When faced with being ridiculed and actions meant to gradually erode the essence of who they are, the women choose to assert their dignity by resorting to force. Denise explains,

We had been drinking and then started arguing, I don't even remember about what. But then he called me a bitch and a whore and other stuff he calls me when he wants to hurt me so I punched him. I take complete responsibility for it. He called the police and I got arrested.

Sixty-one of the women utilized "Self-Defense," physically defending themselves or fighting back to protect themselves and/or their children when they perceived imminent abuse, or their partner was physically attempting and/or actively assaulting them. Rhonda details her experience:

He wouldn't let me leave and was trying to rape me. I grabbed three large kitchen knives and held them all up with my back up against the front door. His mother tried to get in the middle after he took a bat out. I tried to run but he called the cops and I got arrested for threatening him with knives.

According to Taneisha,

We dated for 7 months before he was incarcerated. He was incarcerated for 5 years and we got right back together. The night this happened he promised he would be at my house at a certain time. He was late so I went looking for him and he was at his mother's house. He told me I couldn't come in because he was selling crack to a customer inside. I refused to stay outside. I told him I was going inside to see who the customer was because I just knew he was cheating on me with whoever was inside that house. So I went in the house and found a woman with a crack pipe sitting in the guest bedroom. I told him I wanted to see that woman smoke the crack pipe to prove he wasn't having sex with her. This made him mad. He grabbed me and started punching me and I ran into the living room and grabbed a knife. He tried to get the knife from me and I cut both of us. I got free and called 911. I ended up getting arrested but I was the one who had bite marks from him.

The circumstances of Taneisha's situation illustrate how women's self-defensive actions in particularly complex settings may be overshadowed by the events surrounding them. In Taneisha's case, for example, CLS personnel and intervention providers perceived Taneisha as "deserving arrest" because she knowingly witnessed a drug transaction.

Two of the women's actions were categorized as Aggressive Use of Force. Aggressive Use of Force is defined as her use of force in the presenting situation (which led to her arrest) and not mentioning, or giving any indication during the intake assessment or throughout programming, a history of abuse by a past and/or present partner. For example, Sarah did not identify a history of being abused by her partner or anyone else but she did explain that she was tired of him:

We were at a [college] football game. He is my first real boyfriend. We have been together since high school and my parents like him. While we were watching the game I left to call another guy, someone I like. When I went back to sit with him I told him and we started to fight. We kept fighting and when we were leaving I fell down and when he tried to help me up, in front of campus police, I hit him. I didn't want him to touch me.

Sarah's stated lack of a survivorship history and explanation that she was "tired" of her boyfriend suggest that her Aggressive Use of Force was motivated by the desire to end the relationship and physically, as well as emotionally, hurt her partner. Similarly, Claudia did not identify a past or present survivorship history and explains,

I was told I have to be here by my housing support counselor. I frequently lose it with my boyfriend who lives in the apartment above me. The police were called a few times when we had a fight in the front yard but nothing happened.

Anticipatory is a category shared by eight women. This category is defined by her use of force as a result of historical substantive harm from her current and/or past partners. However, she did not respond with force against the previous abuse. Although she is not currently being abused, she believes abuse is inevitable. Breanna explains,

Four years ago we had a big fight about another woman he had a relationship with. When we were arguing he threw me down on the bed and held me down so hard that he broke my arm and collarbone. I had to be in the hospital for a while. He agreed to be in your [BIP] but I still never recovered from what he did. After [our] baby was born I have been more aggressive and hit him more than once. I know it's not an excuse but it feels like I never recovered from what he did to me.

One woman's description of her situation was categorized as "Both Use Force." This category is defined as neither partner appearing to be the primary aggressor but both partners using force. During the woman's description of the incident, she did not distinguish who was the "victim" or "offender" in the relationship and did not provide further details of the situation. Tina explains,

We got into a physical altercation. A huge fight after a night of drinking. There was physical and verbal abuse. Oh yeah and a gun. The gun was never aimed at anyone, just grabbed to be put away out of fear.

Women (4) who intentionally engaged in behavior behind the scenes of the relationship, with the goal of strategically setting the record straight between them and their abusive partners, were utilizing "Edgework." Alexandra details her experience with "edgework" as follows:

First let me tell you this is not like me. I am a student [. . .] I had never done something like this. Even though [my boyfriend] and I were in a cycle of hooking up-fighting-making up I was really hurt when I saw another girl's name on his computer. Anyway, he loaned me his laptop. I opened it up and I saw an icon on the desktop that said "[woman's name]'s Password." I think he wanted me to see this. I opened the icon and over the next 4 to 6 weeks forwarded her emails to her family, friends, ex-boyfriends. . . . One of those emails I forwarded was an email from [the other woman] to my boyfriend saying she had missed her period and thought she was pregnant. I intentionally forwarded that email to [the other woman's] mom.

Alexandra¹⁴ later learned that her boyfriend, in fact, had intended for her to see his new girlfriend's password, hoping to hurt her and end the relationship. This, however, does not make her actions any less harmful or excuse what she did. But by understanding the components of Alexandra's actions as Edgework, intervention providers are better able to tailor effective services.

"False Accusations" were experienced by 32 women. This is defined as her partner embellishing events from the incident to leverage law enforcement against her and subsequently have her arrested. Laura explains,

I was moving out and he got abusive with me. I was loading my stuff into my car because I was done and was leaving him. He tried to take my Xbox and I slapped him. He called the police and told them I “bear hugged” him, pushed him to the ground and beat him. Come on. He is 6’2” and 250 pounds and I am 5’3” and a 100 pounds but they believed him. He didn’t have a scratch on him. The officer said that someone had to be arrested and taken off the property. I voluntarily told the police that I slapped him so I was arrested. Now I can’t use my degree in early childhood education.

Thus, despite the obvious physical disparity, Laura’s inclination to take responsibility for her actions resulted in her arrest and subsequent collateral consequences of court fines, probation, and an intervention mandate.

Seventeen of the women utilized Horizontal Hostility in their situations. This is understood as when a woman’s use of force, commonly orchestrated by him, is against a third party. Although the third party is also female, she is not in an intimate relationship with the woman. Instead, the third party is usually a past or current girlfriend of his. This “other woman” becomes the target of her aggression. According to Xena’s experience,

I thought we had a good, healthy marriage so I was shocked when he told me he wanted a divorce. I was so upset I couldn’t work. I couldn’t do anything. I was very depressed. So we split up and I moved in with my grandma. The day before the incident [he] kept calling me at work and telling me to come and get my mail at the house. The next morning I went over there to get the mail, around the time he has usually already left for work. I saw another car in the driveway that I didn’t recognize so I was a little bit curious. I got in there and found [him] having sex with another woman. I went crazy. He pinned me to the ground but I got free and started attacking that woman. Then I hit and punched him and I ran outside and started smashing her car windows out. [He] called his best friend who is a police officer and I was, obviously, arrested. I know he set me up for all of this. All of it.

The “Partner Self-Inflicts Injuries” category was experienced by four women. It is defined as the woman’s partner self-inflicting scratches or other physical wounds on his face, abdomen, arms, or elsewhere, typically after the abused partner has withdrawn and before the arrival of law enforcement. For example, Terri explains,

The evening it happened I called my husband to ask him to come home to help with our son who was sick. When he answered the phone I realized he was out with his mistress again, he promised no more extra marital affairs. He came home when I was getting into bed and he got into bed too, even though I asked him not to. He denied being with her so I grabbed for his wallet to look for proof of a dinner receipt or something. He grabbed my hand and laid on me. I tried to get free and accidentally scratched his belly so he called the police. While the police were on their way over he locked himself in the bathroom and scratched himself all over the abdomen, chest, arms. When the police arrived he said I had scratched him over his entire body and then squeezed his testicles until he almost passed out. The police arrested me. You couldn’t see the bruises on my arms yet.

Discussion

The substantial number of women (79)—of many backgrounds—within the “Asserting Dignity” category brings attention to the critical importance of understanding context, “who is doing what to whom and with what impact” (Pence, n.d., p. 2). It is that which occupies, what we earlier introduced, as the space where distinctions must be made. According to McMahon and Pence (2003),

... a woman’s use of violence must also be understood in the context of the whole relationship, rather than in the context of the specific incident that occasions criminal justice intervention. A woman may or may not hit back at the moment when she is being beaten or abused—many women will not, as they realistically fear that any display of defiance will result in an even more brutal beating. Rather than simply “taking it,” however, some women will choose a safer and more strategic moment to “hit back”—to symbolically assert their dignity as persons and signal to themselves and their partners that they will not simply take it. Other women, in fact, hit back when they are being beaten. In doing so, they might protect their bodies and their lives, or their attacker may end up using even more brutality. But some women reach a point when they no longer care about an abuser’s reactions to their acts of self-protection, when protecting fragments of self-worth is more important than stopping the fragmentation of flesh and bones. (p. 51)

Caucasian (45), African American (27), and other women of color (7) predominantly fall into this category. For the African American and other women of color, this may be the result of the “angry black woman” (Potter, 2008, p. 6) stereotype contributing to the arrests of women who are simply refusing to put up with the degradation and abuse any longer. By symbolically asserting their dignity these women, brought to the attention of the CLS, unexpectedly become criminals. This is a human rights and social justice issue that demands nuanced intervention from all community partners (Pence, 2012). Re-thinking the reliance on the CLS must also be part of future solutions. Of course, women survivors are held accountable for their use of force, both by themselves and by the CLS, but failing to understand the context of their actions treats all acts of violence as equivalent regardless of motivation, intent, or impact. The extensive number of women whose depictions of the arrest incident fell within the Self-Defense category also clearly indicates that more work must be done to educate law enforcement as well as be proactive about addressing DV among its primary perpetrators: men who abuse women. This category suggests that the only difference between a woman’s court order to intervention and encouragement for her to seek voluntary survivor support services may be the extent of the responding officer’s investigation. Furthermore, particular attention needs to be paid to how police responders may be influenced to arrest, or not arrest, given the circumstances of the situation. In Taneisha’s case, her use of force took place during a drug purchase. Primary aggressor training, common in many police departments across the country, help officers differentiate between what may appear to be one way on its surface but is actually very different once the full details emerge, and could be extended to explore how a victim could be in a dangerous situation. Training

for police and intervention providers must also address the role personal discretion plays in determining “deserving” versus “undeserving” survivors based on situational circumstances (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008).

Only two women fell within the “Aggressive Use of Force” category and one of 208 women was identified in the category of “Both” her and her partner using force against one another, rather than one being the dominant or primary aggressor. These numbers strongly suggest that the trend of either arresting women as dominant aggressors or mutual combatants is misguided (Dichter, 2013). When the scene is chaotic and stories conflicting, law enforcement officers may arrest both people, “so the courts can figure it out.” A police officer in Miller’s (2005) study pointed out,

We see cross-charging quite a bit, where the police can’t determine who the aggressor is: you know, he says that she scratched him and she says, well, he hit me first and that’s why I scratched him. And the police may cross-charge because they can’t make a determination, which is real difficult for our office because then we have to mesh out who was the aggressor. And to tell you the truth, we can’t always tell. (p. 85)

Once the arrest happens, it is too late to extract survivors from the CLS. A possible solution to this situation may be seen in the city of Duluth’s Crossroads Program (Asmus, 2004). In 1999, the City Attorney’s office adopted a policy in which prosecution of offenders, for minor resistive violence, is not automatic. Concurrently, the Duluth police department agreed to not arrest victims of ongoing abuse who have retaliated with minor violence. “By not treating victims of battering as batterers the Duluth community has not found women’s use of violence to rise, but rather to fall” (Pence & Dasgupta, 2006, p. 16).

The categories “False Accusations” and “Partner Self-Inflicts Injuries” upon himself demonstrate what battered women’s advocates have known for years: Men who batter women manipulate the CLS (Dichter, 2013). As a shelter worker revealed,

We’ve had guys wound themselves, cut themselves, and say “She did it!” and know that she is going to get in trouble, and often these are guys who have been perpetrators for some time. And they’ve learned to do that through their experience with the system. (Miller, 2005, p. 81)

Their manipulation is another demonstration of their societal and institutional entitlement, which so often makes men’s violence against women the precursor to women’s use of force.

Seventeen women’s experiences with “Horizontal Hostility” suggest that a closer look must always be taken to better understand who orchestrated the events that led to the presenting incident. This is particularly important in the course of intervention programming not because it excuses her use of force, but because it allows for a full spectrum of information that enables effective intervention. By breaking the law for use of force against a third party, her actions may be overlooked as “stranger” violence rather than motivated by IPV. Such distinctions are critical to effectively addressing possible survivorship issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Conclusion

By amplifying the voices of arrested women court ordered to intervention, our work constructs a typology of how women describe the incidents that brought them to services. These categories should be understood as overlapping and evolving rather than mutually exclusive and static. The women's words begin the process of creating a language for first responders to better understand the complexity of women's actions, practitioners to improve interventions, and researchers to further investigate the nuances of women's forceful actions. This work is intended to explain how the women view their use of force to contribute to the conversation regarding appropriate community-wide responses. To reduce violence and increase family safety, women who have used non-self-defensive force against their partners, be they survivors or not, need an appropriate response to their actions. But holding survivors accountable, particularly those who are survivors in their current relationships, is a nuanced, community-wide challenge demanding innovation. Such innovation must be founded upon the recognition that many of these women, as RyAnn's story details, perceive themselves with limited alternatives. With limited options they resort to using force, which puts them and their loved ones in greater danger, often brings them tremendous personal shame, and introduces a constellation of collateral consequences.

The women's descriptions emphasize that coordinated community response partners must be tireless in their efforts to train first responders, encourage police to look for the "space for distinction" at the time of arrest, innovate with sentencing practices, utilize gender-responsive probation monitoring (Morash, 2010), cultivate advocates' efforts to more deeply understand and effectively intervene in the lives of women, create intervention tools that speak to women's gendered experiences with violence perpetration, and think well beyond BIP programming as a viable intervention option for women who have used force. Programming practices must be intentional as well as flexible enough to respond to this issue in a gender-responsive, trauma-informed, culturally competent manner. Such efforts are crucial to the safety of women and their families.

A limitation of this work is the need for additional context regarding women's descriptions of events that resulted in their court order to intervention. This limitation could be addressed by future qualitative interviews and focus groups with women court ordered to intervention for their use of force. An additional limitation is that only two geographical areas of the United States were represented. Therefore, a larger sample drawn from additional sites, with continued attention to cultural diversity, detailing women's descriptions of the incidents that brought them to the attention of the CLS and then intervention providers would be especially instructive. Such work done from a qualitative, contextual approach would continue to amplify the voices of those often silenced by their circumstances. In addition, future work investigating the descriptions and experiences of women arrested for using force against their intimate partners who have (a) been arrested and not court ordered to intervention and (b) have had contact with intervention programming and are no longer on probation would expand our growing understanding of this complex issue.

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Notes

1. "Court ordered" applies to the 207 of the 208 women in this analysis but also includes a woman, Claudia, mandated to the program by the supervisor of her housing complex where her use of force against her partner placed her continued residence in jeopardy. If she did not attend programming, she would be evicted. For the purpose of this article, court order will represent both instances.
2. Women often do not experience it as a "justice" system; therefore, we use the term Criminal Legal System.
3. "Domestic violence is a catchall term for any act of illegal abuse by one partner against another. As such it provides an institutional category for case processing that frequently groups very dissimilar behaviors together and treats them as one thing. This is exactly what was happening when victims of ongoing abuse were arrested for hitting back, then charged with the same crime their abuser was committing, convicted of that crime, and sent to a similar rehabilitation group" (Pence, n.d., p. 113).
4. Attorneys often discourage women from taking a case to trial by reminding the women they do not have the economic resources to do so (Larance, 2007).
5. Dichter (2013) found that women's arrest contributed to their feelings of shame and stigma.
6. Communication with group support and intervention participants.
7. In the overall sample, 75% of the women had been arrested at some time, with 85% of the arrests within the previous 6 months for intimate partner violence (IPV)-related charges and 58% of these were dual arrests (Swan & Snow, 2002).
8. All women are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identity.
9. Couples counseling is strongly discouraged in relationships where IPV exists. Refer to The Hotline: <http://www.thehotline.org/2014/08/why-we-dont-recommend-couples-counseling-for-abusive-relationships/>; FaithTrust Institute: <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Policy-Statement-on-DV-Couples-Counseling.pdf>
10. Because the focus of this article is on heterosexual IPV, the lesbian cases were excluded from our analysis.
11. Although sometimes using different labels, Johnson (2006) described Aggressive Violence, Both Use Violence, and Self-Defense in his research, and Miller (2005) described categories similar to Aggressive Violence, Anticipatory, and Self-Defense in her work.

12. Women self-identified and we compiled the categories that included 150 Caucasian women, 116 African American women, and 22 other women of color (which included Congolese, Filipino, German, Hispanic, Honduran, Lebanese, Liberian, Mexican, Middle Eastern, Native American, Palestinian, Romanian, Ukrainian, African American/Caucasian, African American/Hispanic, American Indian, American Indian/African American/Caucasian, American Indian/Caucasian, American Indian/Hispanic Women).
13. This woman was weeks from her 18th birthday and entered the program with written parental consent.
14. Alexandra was charged with malicious use of a telecommunications device.

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