

Why Do Men Batter

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As programs for batterers proliferate around the country, they often become a touchstone for disagreements over the source of battering. Is battering a psychological problem, an anger management problem, a communication problem? How a community understands the source of battering in many ways determines the type of program it will support.

In considering the source of battering, it may be helpful to take a look at Bill, a man who batters and is in a batterers intervention program. Bill has acknowledged using force against his partner, Janet; isolating her by blocking the doorway when she wants to leave, criticizing her friends, taking her keys, unplugging the phone, and staying out without telling her where he is. How do we understand his violence, and how does Bill go about making personal change? How these questions are answered has meaning and consequences for the community.

Common Explanations

Battering has come to be commonly understood as a learned behavior, especially likely to occur if a man witnessed violence or was a target of violence as a child. Although this explanation has strengths, when we use it we tend to overlook the fact that women are usually available as role models of non-violent behavior. Yet boys, and adult men, do not commonly emulate women's behavior. A simple learning theory of battering will not suffice, because it does not explain why women are so often invisible to boys and men as models of how to be in relationships.

Battering is sometimes understood as a problem within the individual, such as the inability to recognize and express feelings. Another intra-personal explanation is that a man batters because he is unable to assertively express his needs and desires. It is true that some men who batter are poor at identifying and communicating feelings. However, Bill is not simply attempting to express a feeling when he says "you can't leave because you've been cheating on me." To account for Bill's behavior as an interpersonal communication problem is not convincing. He clearly knows what he wants, and is communicating it by words and action. Battering is not an inability to express feelings or wants, but a method by which a man does so.

Battering is sometimes seen as an anger management problem: a man is unable to express anger constructively. But Bill manages his anger quite effectively, using it as a weapon with which to batter. He directs it against women - not against the legal system or against his employer, for example. He also uses the fact that he was angry to help him get away with using abuse to control Janet. For instance, after physically battering Janet, Bill uses anger as a justification for his actions and shows feelings of regret and remorse to avoid any consequences of battering. Men who batter express feelings, including anger, when and to whom they want.

The fact that men who batter *are* able to manage skills such as communication and the expression of feelings allows that men may use these skills as tactics to batter. They are a part of battering rather than an explanation of battering. When a man is selective about when, where and to whom he is abusive, the implication is that battering is neither a communication problem nor an anger management problem, but a choice.

When a man hits or yells at a woman, that is a choice he makes. No person or circumstance can make a man attack his partner verbally or physically. There are circumstances which may increase the likelihood

that a man will batter, but no circumstances make it inevitable that a man will make abusive choices. This means that explanations of battering which are interpersonal, such as communication issues or provocation, are inaccurate.

Men, rather than circumstances, are responsible for abusive choices. Thus, an accurate explanation of battering would account for the reasons men make the choice to batter rather than an outside force that causes them to batter. In short, men batter to gain power and control over another person. This explanation is profound in that it frames individual acts of violence within a pattern of behavior. The explanation of power and control has become, however, something of a cliché, and its larger implications are overlooked. One often overlooked implication is that battering is purposeful. Men choose behavior in a systematic way in order to gain power and control. There is a function to a man's battering. That is, men batter in the short term to get a woman to do what he wants or to stop her from doing something.

When a man yells at a woman, criticizing her, he knows what effect his behavior will have on her. In the short term, his yelling will cause fear and pain, and in the longer term he will destroy her personhood so that he can have power and control over her. Men who batter know and choose the effects of battering. This is disturbing because it leaves us with the question, why do men want power and control?

Sexism as the problem

Sexism is the source of men's choice to use violent and abusive tactics to gain power and control over a woman. The word "source" here means a wellspring, not a cause. Just as single incidents of violence are better understood within a pattern of that person's abusive behavior, so individual batterers are better understood within a social context of sexism. Within the context of sexism, it is inevitable, rather than unthinkable, that a large number of men will choose to use violence and abuse. The connection between sexism and men's violence can be better understood through a definition.

Sexism is gender prejudice + power. Gender prejudice is the predisposition to experience women as inferior to men. It is the filter through which men experience women's behavior as flawed, out of place, even evil. With such perceptions, men believe it is necessary to control women, and are willing to use violent and abusive choices to do so. Men's power to batter women is not only personal; it flows from institutions whose social function is to set cultural norms and hold violators accountable. Let's return to Bill for some examples to illustrate.

The first example looks at prejudice. Bill identified as his reason or justification for isolating Janet like this: Janet's friends are a bad influence on her, and she should stay away from them. Bill struggled with the connection of his justification to sexism. He eventually realized that he believed women are easily tempted and not trustworthy -- that they need men to keep their moral compass pointed in the right direction. This belief led to his expectation that Janet check out her friends with him.

The source of Bill's beliefs is sexist social norms. When asked the sources of his belief that women are easily tempted and not trustworthy, Bill quickly answered, "The story of Eve" and pop psychology's characterization of women as "emotionally based" (unlike men are who "rationally based.") There is, then, a cascading effect from sexist cultural norms and messages about women to personally held beliefs about women, to expectations men have for women they are partnered with, to abuse and justifications when women act freely. Sexist norms and beliefs do not force any man to make the choice to be abusive, but they do provide the source from which such choices flow.

Now let us look at power, the second part of our definition. The power men have to batter is increased by the sexism of institutions. As institutions set cultural norms, they have considerable power to name and define what is true. When institutions promote sexist messages about women, the seeming validity and reasonableness of Bill's beliefs increases. As a result, he has more power in the relationship to enforce his expectations as rules.

Institutional support is often a source of power unavailable for women. If Janet asserted before a congregation that she should make decisions for the family about who they see, she would not be taken as seriously as Bill. Institutions which name reality can increase the power men have to batter.

In addition to setting cultural norms, institutions are also responsible for holding violators of those norms accountable. However, when institutions promote sexist beliefs, they collude with men's control of women. This becomes a second source for increasing men's power over women. If the church accepts Bill's justification for his abuse, it colludes with him by supporting his belief that he has the right to control Janet. Janet receives an implicit message that her behavior is the problem -- that if she doesn't follow Bill's rules, she's liable to be punished. This is one way in which institutional collusion can increase the power men have to batter.

Our summary definition, sexism = gender prejudice + power, says that men are prejudiced to experience women as inferior to themselves, and become willing to batter women. Institutions increase men's power to batter by setting sexist social norms, colluding with men who batter and implicitly holding women accountable for violating sexist norms.

Men's resistance to seeing sexism as the source of battering and . . . the solution for Bill and the community

An understanding of sexism as the source of battering has implications for Bill, for other men and for the community. For Bill, the understanding that sexism is the source of his choice to batter means that his work to change is counter-cultural. Within a culture of sexism, controlling tactics are the expression of social norms, including chivalrous or deferential treatment. Genuinely respectful treatment of women is counter-cultural (respectful meaning honestly expressing ourselves and taking women seriously). In order to be respectful and safe towards women, Bill must work to change his beliefs, and to be aware of institutions which express sexist norms about women. If he does not change his beliefs, he may stop his violence for a period of time, but he will be merely "white knuckling" -- in other words, restraining his desire to control Janet rather than working to have a non-abusive relationship with her.

The situation is much the same for all men. Like Bill, we are often resistant to the idea that sexism is the source of male violence. To accept this means having to face our commonalities with men who do batter. Both slapping a woman and dismissing her ideas flow from the same source -- sexism. Such similarities can be more easily discounted if other explanations of battering are accepted. Acknowledging sexism means recognizing that we as men each have illegitimate power in male-female relationships. It means men share the problem and the benefits of battering, and the responsibility for ending it.

Understanding sexist beliefs and practices as the source of battering allows the community to work to prevent violence with a new clarity and resolve. Because violence is a choice, the community cannot create circumstances in which men will refrain from abuse. The community can, however, diminish men's prejudice and power by ending sexism. By diminishing prejudice, fewer men may make the choice to abuse women, and more men may be willing to treat women with respect. Additionally, diminishing sexism would change the context in which men make abusive choices. Men would be less able to justify abuse to the woman and to the community. As a result, when a man chose to be abusive and violent, perhaps he would be unable to have systematic power and control over a woman. In summary, any significant reduction in violence against women will entail addressing sexism as the source men's battering.