

## **When 50-50 Isn't Fair: The Case Against Couple Counseling in Domestic Abuse**

*Phyllis B. Frank and Gail Kadison Golden*

Therapists and counselors in a variety of settings are frequently called on to counsel couples who seek help with aspects of their lives that range from assistance with child rearing to communication, sexuality, and other relationship issues. It is only in recent years, however, that we have begun to recognize that many couples who seek marriage and family counseling do so against a background of domestic violence.

Current estimates suggest that in 50 percent of all marriages there will be at least one physically abusive episode during the course of the marriage (Peachy, 1988). This estimate does not include the untold numbers of women who are systematically abused through nonphysical patterns of coercive and controlling tactics inflicted on them by their partners. The result of this emotional and psychological abuse, often reported by victims to be equally or even more damaging than physical violence, is women who are not free-- to speak, to do, or to be.

This reality raises important issues for therapists and counselors. We know that both partners, for very different reasons, are generally reluctant to disclose information about his abuse and violence in their relationship. To balance this fact, we must raise our own consciousness about all forms of men's abuse of women in heterosexual couple relationships and assume responsibility for learning about the climate of control that he has created when the couple is not in our office. To accomplish this, it is imperative to interview each partner alone and to ask specific questions related to violence and other controlling strategies (Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, 1993). Failure to gather this information can result in counseling that at best is a waste of time and at worst colludes with and perpetuates men's violence, thus further endangering women.

Women who are being beaten, intimidated, or controlled by their partners are not free to engage in the kind of open dialogue that counseling promotes. In fact, a woman who does speak openly to a therapist or counselor in the presence of an abusive partner may be in serious danger from him when she returns home (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

Those who counsel couples whose relationships are marked by stated or unacknowledged violence are conducting sessions in the presence of a powerful censor. Men who abuse their partners control their relationships by instituting serious restrictions and rules (Jones & Schechter, 1992). The women know what those rules are, although often they cannot articulate them. The therapist who knows nothing of these rules may unwittingly encourage a woman to cross a line that will seriously endanger her.

Therapists or counselors who are aware of abuse in a relationship and who agree to see the couple together collude in another way with a set of damaging insinuations that further imperil women. Although the very act of working with a couple in which there is an abusive partner implies that the problem is in the relationship, it is not (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Abusive men are solely responsible for their abusive behavior (Thorn-Finch, 1992). Conversely, the victim of abusive behavior has no part in the attacks against her. No matter how provocative or inappropriate women's behavior, it neither justifies nor excuses men's abuse (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

When working with violent relationships therapists have been tempted to encourage women to learn to alter their behaviors so as not to provoke their partner's abuse. However, women cannot (Davis & Hagen, 1992). Because her behavior is in no way responsible for her partner's abusiveness, any changes she makes will not be the deciding factor in his stopping the abuse.

Men are abusive to their women partners because of thousands of years of patriarchal culture, institutions, and laws that have permitted, condoned, and even encouraged these actions (Jones &

Schechter, 1992). Counseling a violent or abusive man together with his partner conceals and therefore perpetuates such sanctions. It also gives the message that one can improve relationships without exposing and stopping a man's abusiveness. In fact, the man must end his abusiveness (and his sense of entitlement to his partner and her services) before couple work can be even considered (Adams, 1988).

It is enormously helpful if therapists and counselors providing treatment understand the cultural context of domestic violence and the implicit permission for men to abuse that continues to be embedded in our institutions and in our communities. With this framework, strong, confrontive, educational counseling that separates men from their partners, defines the spectrum of abuse, and holds abusers solely accountable for their actions, has the possibility of supporting men to stop their abusive mistreatment. Such intervention is the best protection for a woman from the therapeutic abuse perpetrated by assuming that she has a part in provoking her partner's behavior.

Arresting men who batter is an effective "therapeutic" intervention *when* there is a coordinated criminal justice response and the crime is taken seriously by the courts. Therapy will have a much greater chance of being useful in a community where there is a public commitment to end domestic violence. (Sherman, 1982). Conversely, family systems therapy, which isolates the problem in the relationship, endangers battered women (Jones & Schechter, 1992). So does mediation, which assumes that the two parties have equal standing in a dispute and the ability to negotiate fairly. In fact, "mediation of an assault" is a conflict in terms (Jones & Schechter, 1992, pg. 239). The power imbalance and the violence preclude equitable negotiations between the two parties.

What social workers do not know about domestic violence can kill their clients. Social workers have been trained in a variety of approaches (for example, behavior modification, family systems, and psychoanalysis) that seem generally useful with other kinds of clients and issues. Imposing these models on work with men who are abusive and their partners, however, not only may prove ineffective but also may actually exacerbate the danger of his assault. The past decades of groundbreaking work in the field of domestic abuse have yielded clear, usable information. It is incumbent on us to be open to theory and analysis that come out of the work that has been done with thousands of abused women. Therapists and counselors in hospitals, courts, schools, mental health clinics, and the like are in a unique position to confront the issue of abuse by asking the right questions and by disallowing treatment interventions that perpetuate the problem.

Understanding the dangers to women posed by joint interviewing, necessitates thoughtful adjustments to clinical practice. Because mental health workers can not know what truly happens behind closed doors, and because statistically such large numbers of women are not safe, ethical practice requires that we craft all of our interventions with the understanding that we may inadvertently place women at risk of harm from her partner. The intake is especially important since it is the first contact taking place in the absence of much important information. One family service agency, after years of trial and error, has found the following procedures to be very helpful:

When a person calls to request couple counseling they will be given an appointment. There is no attempt to telephone screen any caller regarding the possibility that a woman is experiencing abuse from her partner. In all instances, we feel it is in the best interest of women to meet with an intake worker, even if she later declines treatment recommendations that may not include couple counseling. We advise callers that couple intakes require about two hours and, as a routine part of the assessment, both parties will be seen separately before being seen together. It is important to leave enough time. Two hours seems about right.

Women are always seen first. A thorough interview is done to determine, as best as possible, whether a partner is perpetrating physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse against her. If it is

determined that this is indeed the case, information is given about domestic abuse, including local domestic violence service agencies and the reason why separate, individual counseling will be offered. We review with her that after we see him, we will meet with them as a couple, very briefly, to give our suggestions for treatment. We will share with her as to what we plan to tell them when meeting together.

Battered women's advocates suggest that in order to assure her safety, we should not focus on his abusive behavior as the reason for treatment decisions. They suggest that we say something like:

"At this time, the level of marital conflict is too intense for couple counseling. Therefore we will start with individual sessions, and then review." Or: "At this time, each party has individual issues that need to be worked on before couple counseling would help." We can use the inference that couple counseling may be arranged at some time in the future.

Women should be told in advance what we will say and her input should be sought. She knows him best and may have some further thought about how to present things to him. After he is seen, the couple should be seen together for a very short time, simply to present our recommendations.

Even if either partner or both partners decline treatment, women will have been given valuable information about domestic abuse and resources available to help her now or at some time in the future.

#### References

- Adams, D. (1988). Treatment models of men who batter: A profeminist analysis. In K. Yllo & M. Bograd (Eds.), *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse* (pp.176-199). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Davis, L. V., & Hagen, J. L. (1992). The problem of wife abuse: The interrelationship of social policy and social work practice. *Social Work*, 37, 15-20.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1992). *Women Violence And Social Change*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, A., & Schechter, S. (1992). *When Love Goes Wrong*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Peachy, R. (1988). *Consulting In Research And Psychiatry: Statistics*. Philadelphia: National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women.
- Sherman, L. (1982). *Minneapolis Study*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice
- Thorn-Finch, R. (1992). *Ending The Silence: The Origins And Treatment Of Male Violence Against Women*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County. (1993). *Batterers Intervention Project, Registration Questionnaire*. (Available from Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, Inc. 77 South Main Street, New City, NY 10956)

Phyllis B. Frank, MA, is director of the VCS Community Change Project. Gail K. Golden, EdD, CSW, is clinical director of VCS, Inc., 77 South Main Street, New City, NY 10956, info@endisms.org

An earlier version of this paper appeared as an Op-Ed piece in SOCIAL WORK Volume 39, Number 6 November 1994