INTERVENTIONS WITH MEN WHO ARE VIOLENT TO THEIR PARTNERS: STRATEGIES FOR EARLY ENGAGEMENT

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Practitioners who view intimate partner violence as a set of strategies aimed at maintaining positions of power and privilege often face an engagement dilemma when men at their first contact talk of themselves as disempowered by circumstances such as separation, loss of access to children, legal problems, substance abuse issues, and their own history of being abused. This paper explores how a language-oriented approach to violence can assist practitioners in responding to abuser’s current perceptions while avoiding collusion with justifications for violence. It examines common ways of speaking that men will employ to justify their violence then explores practical ways to identify and neutralized these messages before exploring personal opportunities for change.

Men who are violent to their partners present to practitioners in a wide range of service contexts. They can present at doctors’ surgeries, at mental health centers, at counseling services, at community services, at welfare agencies, in hospitals, and so forth. In each of these situations, practitioners are presented with key opportunities to engage these men in considering the possibility of a change process. Such consideration requires engagement in an honest and self-reflective conversation about how controlling behaviors are impacting others in their lives. But conversations about violent and controlling behavior are often perceived as difficult to initiate. They are difficult not only because of discomfort at enquiring into areas that are normally treated as sensitive and private but also because of uncertainty about what stance to take. On the one hand, when practitioners adopt an empathic and reflective stance, they risk implying that they support and perhaps condone the violence. On the other hand, a challenging stance involving open disapproval and perhaps admonishment risks immediate disengagement. Accordingly, practitioners can find themselves at first contact uncertain of how to respond because they feel caught in a dilemma between either colluding with the violence or driving their client away.

The following discussion will explore the way this dilemma permeates throughout the early phases of intervention with male partner abusers. It is based on the author’s 12-year involvement in community-based counseling and group programs for heterosexual men who abuse their partners. These activities occurred in the northern suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand, a suburban region comprised predominantly with people of middle-to-upper income and English-speaking European descent. As the majority of men participating in the counseling and group programs are not mandated to attend, the approach developed in this paper is intended for men with moderate commitment to partner abuse and may be less applicable to those with a strong commitment and a long history of violence and abuse.

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The first consideration in responding to intervention dilemmas concerns the understanding as to what might motivate men to be violent and hurt the people with whom they supposedly have their closest relationships. The way this perplexing issue is tackled will shape the kind of strategies that are adopted for engaging and supporting men in change. The following will contrast individual-oriented and pro-feminist interpretations for the origins of violence. The contrast will help identify why the initial process of engaging abusers is a delicate undertaking.

Individual-Oriented Approaches

Research on interventions focused specifically on male partner abuse has only begun to surface in the last 13 years (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Tolman & Edleson, 1995). Pioneer attempts to intervene required theoretical frameworks upon which to base strategies, but adequate explanatory models for the dynamics of such violence were yet to evolve. Early attempts at intervention understandably looked around at approaches used in other fields of psychological practice. The methods taken up were adapted from their original contexts then imported for use with violence toward women. For example, psychoanalytic (Brennan, 1985; Symonds, 1978) and psycho-dynamic approaches (Neizo & Lanza, 1984; Pattison, 1985) were employed to help abusers respond to the negative effects of past experiences in their family of origin. Later, couple communication approaches were applied to assist couples in identifying negative communication patterns and to work out strategies that facilitate expressions of concern without resorting to violence or other controlling tactics (Neidig, Friedman, & Collins, 1985; Stith, Rosen, & McCollum, 2003). Similarly, learning theory and cognitive-behavioral approaches were incorporated into what has been generally referred to as either “skills deficit” or “anger management” intervention strategies (Deschner, 1984; Sonkin & Durphy, 1982). These typically consisted of 10–15 psycho-educational sessions during which men are encouraged to recognize anger at an early point, to delay expression when at risk of violence, and to find other nonviolent forms of communicating negative emotions. These techniques continue to comprise a significant part of most stopping violence programs (Healey, Smith, & O’Sullivan, 1998; Saunders, 1989).

While the use of such models provided a springboard to designing new interventions, the direct transfer of approaches from one field to another has a tendency to override the specialized aspects of working with partner abuse, in particular the requirements for safety and the avoidance of collusion. For example, the use of skills deficit approaches has attracted criticism from a number of quarters (Adams, 1989; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson et al., 1992; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989). Most importantly these criticisms focus on a tendency to de-politicize partner violence and a failure to address the differences in power between men and women. The emphasis on control difficulties or skills deficits ignores the purposefulness and effectiveness of violence in gaining levels of social advantage. Attention is diverted from questions of moral responsibility to issues of technique. In the absence of this wider analysis, increases in interpersonal skills could be used to further the abuser’s repertoire of abuse. For example, more competent expression of negative feelings such as anger could facilitate a shift from less physical violence to more effective verbal abuse. The woman remains just as fearful and controlled as before, but the range of strategies are more subtle and less socially offensive, consequently less likely to be detected (Robertson, 1999).

Pro-feminist Approaches

Pro-feminist approaches (Gondolf, 1985; Pence & Paymar, 1993) view male partner violence as “a socio-political problem” (Adams, 1989, p. 3). Whereas individual-oriented approaches emphasize the psychological origins of violent behavior, pro-feminist accounts de-emphasize origins in favor of looking at the current social utility of such violence (Schechter & Gary, 1988; Yllö, 1993). A man pursues violence toward his partner primarily because he gains from it. He gains control of how she behaves; he gains protection from her legitimate complaints or criticisms; and he secures a position for himself in the home where male dominance and one-sided male privilege continues unchallenged (Adams, 1989; Edleson & Tolman, 1992). Men are able to achieve these gains primarily because of a socially sanctioned inequality
of power between men and women. Efforts to reduce the incidence of male violence in the home also require addressing the social infrastructure which supports that violence; in particular, the widely held beliefs that help justify and minimize the violence and oppression of women are as follows: “men have greater entitlement to power than women,” “women are just as violent as men,” and “domestic violence is not as bad as street violence.” Such beliefs help the abuser justify continued violence as well as encouraging those in contact with the abusers (friends, family, professionals, and institutions) to stand back and to avoid confronting the abuse. Accordingly, pro-feminist intervention with male violence requires a multileveled approach that seeks to challenge men committed to oppressive dominance of their partners (Edleson & Grusznski, 1988). The recommended levels of intervention include: inviting men to take responsibility for the safety of those they live with (Jenkins, 1990); questioning the beliefs that support violence (Pence & Paymar, 1993); and, on a broader front, holding institutions and professionals responsible for actions which may further endanger victims (Saunders, 2003; Schechter & Gary, 1988).

**ENGAGEMENT DILEMMAS**

Pro-feminist approaches evolved from women’s experiences of male partner violence and as such differ from models that have been imported from other contexts and thereby provide a more appropriate reference base for work with male partner abusers. However, as a guide to working with men, they are constrained by their incongruence with how men experience their violence. The problem is one of delivery. At the point at which most men present to services, they tend by that time to perceive themselves in positions lacking in power (Gondolf & Hanneken, 1987). This view runs directly contrary to the message they are likely to receive. According to pro-feminist theory, their violence stems from the greater access men have to resources and privileges, consequently when they attend sessions they hear frequent mention of the powerfulness of men (Pence & Paymar, 1993). This does not match with their current experiences of powerlessness.

**Abusers’ Perceptions of Powerlessness**

The following lists seven of the ways in which male abusers initially presenting to services might commonly feel disempowered:

1. *Prior experiences of being abused.* Approximately half the men attending our programs describe themselves as having come from homes in which they were physically, mentally, or emotionally abused. Some disclose experiences of sexual abuse. Reports from other programs indicate similar abusive backgrounds of abuse (Fitch & Papantonio, 1983; Kivel, 1992). Population surveys and controlled studies have found similar links to childhood abuse (Cappell & Heiner, 1990; Dutton & Hart, 1992).

2. *Issues with alcohol and other drug use.* At least half of those who have attended our programs admit alcohol and drug abuse is associated with their violence and similar high rates have been reported in other programs (Kivel, 1992; Roberts, 1987; Testa, 2004) with further evidence of a link between substance misuse and male partner in many controlled studies (Boles & Miotto, 2003; O’Farrell & Murphy, 1995; Slade, Daniel, & Heisler, 1991). The abuser’s perceptions of loss of control typically include: failure to prevent initiating drinking/use, failure to stop further drinking/use, failure to prevent intoxication, failure to control what is said and carried out during intoxication, and failure to remember afterward.

3. *Occupational loss and uncertainty.* The effects of unemployment and redundancy surface as regular issues in our group programs. Other programs report as high as a quarter of their abusers are not employed (Fitch & Papantonio, 1983; Sonkin, Martin, & Walker, 1985). Howell and Pugeliesi (1988) re-analyzed a national survey of violence in the United States and found employment status coincided with significant increases in the likelihood of violence for men aged under 40 years.

4. *Poor expression of emotional needs.* In a questionnaire study of 100 male partner abusers, Allen, Calsyn, Fehrenbach, and Benton (1989) found that their sample was
more likely to have difficulties expressing intimacy and affection. Similar deficits in expression have been examined in the domains of assertiveness (Maiuro, Cahn, & Vitaliano, 1986; Rosenbaum & O’Leary, 1981), the management of conflict (Holzworth-Munroe & Anglin, 1992; Lloyd, 1990), and the expression of anger (Heyman, O’Leary, & Jouriles, 1995). Also, reportedly associated with poor self-expression are low levels of self-esteem (Goldstein & Rosenbaum, 1985) and higher rates of stress (Julian & McKenry, 1993) and depression (Pan, Neidig, & O’Leary, 1994).

5. Insecurity in relationships. Less commented on in the literature, but a strong theme in our programs, is the claim by men that it was the threat of losing their partners that first prompted them to approach the service. They typically describe their many previous attempts to improve the situation; their strategies vary but often include attempts to avoid negative talk and restrict the influence of “bad” friends and family. As things deteriorate they gradually increase their use of controlling tactics in order, as they see it, to keep the relationship from falling apart. Despite all efforts to the contrary, behaviors that they adopted initially to maintain the relationship are now placing it in jeopardy. This growing sense of vulnerability within their relationships fuels strong emotions associated with boundaries and possession, in particular, emotions of jealousy (Roy, 1982) and suspiciousness of outsiders and fearful attachment (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994).

6. Involvement in legal proceedings. Sonkin et al. (1985) reported that half the men they assessed for the San Francisco Family Violence Project were involved with the criminal justice system. Court involvements do not only apply to those who have been mandated to attend sessions by the courts (Barrera, Palmer, Brown, & Kalaher, 1994; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). Restrictions and threats to personal freedoms can include: court-mandated referral to the programs, occupation orders of their homes, protection orders prohibiting contact with partners, custody orders restricting contact with children, assault charges pursued by the police, and traffic convictions for those with alcohol and drug problems. Such restrictions are necessary to ensure the safety of victims, but abusers initially have difficulty coming to terms with restrictions on personal liberty for behaviors they as yet do not fully identify as unreasonable.

7. Social isolation. In a questionnaire study, Allen et al. (1989) found abusers more likely to fall into categories of “loners” or “rebels.” Other investigators have commented on difficulties in forming and maintaining close interpersonal relationships (Kivel, 1992; Levenson & Gottman, 1983). At the point of entry into stopping violence programs, this isolation is further compounded by the threat of, or actual loss of, partner relationships. Themes include: the emotional impact of separations; the loss of support from previously mutual friends who disapprove of the violence; court-enforced loss of contact with partners and children; loss of access to the family home; and associated decreased involvement with neighbors and local social supports.

Collusion versus Engagement

Most men abusing their partners who present for varying reasons to service professionals are likely to identify with at least one of these seven levels of perceived powerlessness; some will claim all of them. From the outside, their perceptions of powerlessness rate poorly when contrasted with the loss of liberty and dignity experienced by those they choose to abuse. Despite this contrast, most men at first contact prefer to remain focused on their own lack of choice over what is happening to them in their lives. A direct challenge to their preoccupations at this early stage risks prompting them to disengage. On the other hand, adopting a softer approach risks buying in and perhaps colluding with justifications for violence. Tactful and nonconfrontational discussion of events could provide them with the space to assemble a range of explanations for the violence and thereby may assist them in claims of reduced responsibility. For example, a man who attributes his violence to drunkenness could claim that it was alcohol rather than he who made the choice to abuse. Similarly, the view that men are socialized into violence could provide the abuser with a rationale for claiming “men are more violent than women” thus normalizing male violence and reducing the incentive for change. Professionals
can also collude in this process by adding explanations to the abuser’s repertoire of justifications. For instance, a practitioner’s reference to childhood experiences of trauma could provide a wealth of material for constructing justifications. By reviewing the possible family origins of violence, the focus swings toward constructing rationales for violence and away from confronting its purposeful utility.

The process of engagement is critical to ensuring an intervention can move on beyond an initial encounter. But at the point of first contact, how might a practitioner engage abusers in further discussion without colluding in justifications and without providing camouflage for continued abuse? A clear solution to this is not obvious in other current approaches to male partner violence. For example, skills deficit approaches would naturally seek to engage the abuser but are unclear on how to avoid collusion with justifications in the formation of a therapeutic alliance. This paper proposes that a shift to a language-oriented understanding of violence can provide guidance for practitioners on how to manage their way through this dilemma.

THE LANGUAGE OF APPROPRIATION

Male partner violence involves a complex array of tactics and strategies that convey meanings in ways that appropriate or claim ownership over how partners behave as well as how they speak, think, feel, and make sense of their worlds. On this basis, controlling tactics can be seen less as discrete behaviors and more as linguistic events that link in with other linguistic events in ways that appropriate the experience of others. This orientation differs from both individual-oriented and pro-feminist perspectives in that violent behavior is interpreted less as discrete events or events with material and political functions and more as oppressive forms of communication that can profoundly affect how people experience their world. A language-oriented perspective views violence as communicative event that has the potential of shaping the way others perceive and interpret their position in a social context. To illustrate this further, this perspective can be seen as grounded on the following four basic understandings:

1. **Language and Interpretations of Reality Interact.** For some time, social theorists of various persuasions have argued that language mediates cultural norms and that in this position it both reveals and influences much of what we believe and how we interpret our experience. The changeable nature of our social world is particularly evident in the way both normative beliefs and language shift over time—as they have over the last 50 years regarding sexual practices, drug use, and national identities. Social constructionists emphasize how many of the categories we use to organize our social reality have evolved out of interactions between social circumstances and language (Gergen, 1990, 1999; Lakoff, 1987). These could include categories as basic as emotions (Averill, 1985), race (Frankenberg, 1993), knowledge (Latour & Woolgar, 1979), and sexual preference (Kitzinger, 1987). The way we speak and the categories we use help shape our social realities, and in return, the language itself is shaped by these perceptions. In this way, social constructionism has highlighted the active role language plays in influencing and shaping personal interpretations of reality.

2. **Violence is an Expressive Act.** Male partner violence is seldom a disconnected series of discrete abusive acts (Gavey, 2004; Yllo, 1993). It more typically carries important messages. Each act in a series of violent acts works together into a continuous and repeating sentence which states to the victim: “You are worthy of abuse!” and by implication: “You are worthless!” In this way, violence can be seen as more than a product of other cognitive and behavioral processes; it is an expressive vehicle in itself. For example, abusers frequently chose to damage household objects in ways that appear more than arbitrary or out of control, but on closer inspection, their choice of what to damage appears purposely designed to convey strong messages. They might choose objects with emotional significance—a special present, a memento of past happiness. They might choose symbols of safety or freedom—breaking a door, car, or telephone. Violence as an expressive event can be seen to share many of the linguistic properties of verbal behavior; it has its own syntax, semantics, and rhetoric (Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 2003; Winkelmann & Shearer-Creeman, 2004). For example, a punch...
could be seen as one basic unit of a sentence, occupying a position much like a noun; the pauses and spaces between abusive episodes serve to punctuate and emphasize the next impending episode; the resulting fear and pain carries the meaning and significance of the action; and the various techniques of delivery contribute to the rhetoric of its application.

3. *Violence Occurs Within Context of Other Expressive Acts.* A violent act, while objectionable in its own right, becomes additionally abhorrent when it is placed in the context of a series of other violent and coercive acts. The potency of violent behavior only makes sense when placed within the context of an integrated program of other abusive acts. A slap, an insult, a lie, a threat, a broken promise, each act as an isolated incident may not appear to have major significance, but when taken together the effect of each act functions interactively, contributing cumulatively to a complex fabric that serves to enmesh the recipient (Schechter & Gary, 1988; Strube, 1988). For example, a minor criticism of a partner’s appearance, when placed in context with repeated messages of inadequacy and backed up by physical intimidation, can have a major impact on the partner’s level of self-esteem. Similarly, the timing and mode of delivery can amplify the effects of the abuse. For example, the man who adopts strategies of occasional and unpredictable violence can effectively promote sustained periods of fearfulness; the woman can never be sure when to expect the next round of abuse, she remains in a constant state of anxious vigilance. In this way, the effects of the brief and infrequent episodes of violence gradually permeate the longer periods containing no obvious violence.

4. *The Use of Violence is Connected with Interpretations of Reality.* If male partner violence is viewed as having linguistic properties and language participates in shaping how we interpret our social reality, then language can be seen to mediate an interaction between violence and personal interpretations of reality. This connection between violence and interpretations of reality affects both parties in different ways. For the man, somewhere in the way he models his world lies a sense of an entitlement which he uses to justify dominance of his partner (Adams et al., 2003; Frieze & McHugh, 1992). For the woman, the abuse has the effect of infiltrating and appropriating the way she experiences her world (Towns & Adams, 1999).

**ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AT FIRST CONTACT**

In attempting to challenge male abuse of tactics of power and control, practitioners risk hostility and/or withdrawal from men at the early phases of an intervention. The men’s own perceptions of powerlessness and their difficulties in distinguishing personal experience from universal realities lead them to perceive any hint of a challenge as a threat to their whole approach to life. The interaction can often appear to the practitioner as if poised on a knife’s edge and the way language is used becomes a critical tool in tipping the interaction in favor of engagement. The following describes an approach that has developed from our work in engaging men into community-based violence intervention programs. The approach requires practitioners to attend to what is said at three levels simultaneously: First they need to recognize when men are employing appropriating language; second, to maintain safety and avoid collusion, the effects of this language need to be neutralized, and third they need to respond to opportunities to validate expressions of personal realities.

**Level 1: Recognizing the Language of Appropriation**

If violent behavior is viewed as continuous with other types of linguistic behavior, functional aspects of the abuse should be reflected in the language of abusers. The language of appropriation involves ways of speaking that either explicitly or implicitly claim ownership of another person’s experience; this can include how they think, feel, and what they believe. The following identifies five ways that men at first contact might use appropriating language:

1.1. *Minimizing.* Minimizing incorporates language that plays down the significance of the violent behavior. For example:
• I’ve only ever hit her once.

The “only,” as with “never” and “merely,” calls forth a comparison; it activates for the listener (presumably male) a contrast between what is happening at a micro level in the relationship and what is happening on a macro level in society. It suggests that: “Compared to the other brutal acts people perpetrate elsewhere, this act is relatively minor.” Such a comparison asks the listener to reinterpret the victim’s experience of violation as insignificant in contrast to a public understanding of social and global violations. Other examples include:

• I never hit her with a closed fist.
• It didn’t really hurt that much.
• It was only a scratch.

1.2. Justifying. A statement justifies acts of violence when it uses publicly accessible explanations to attribute or partially attribute the violence to somewhere or someone other than the perpetrator. For example:

• She goes wild and attacks me.

Reference to her violent behavior serves to legitimate the man’s violent reaction. It calls on a more common belief that: “Violence is admissible in response to the violence of others.” However, such an explanation also serves to disguise the marked impact male access to physical and economic power has on the extra potency of their abuse. Other similar examples that falsely assume the equality of power between abusers and victims include:

• She always has to have the last word.
• I was provoked.
• I was only trying to defend myself.

A variation of these justifications is to make more explicit reference to public explanations for violence. Loss of control is claimed to have occurred because of alcohol, because of a build up of anger, or perhaps simply because everybody makes mistakes sometimes:

• I was drunk at the time.
• I have to have some way of venting my anger.
• Every man has his limit.

These indirect references to public explanations serve to diffuse responsibility for the abuse and promote for the victim views that discourage change.

1.3. Re-educating. The abuser often reinterprets his violence as a means of “re-educating” partners into conforming to his understanding of what he sees is really happening in the world. He develops this approach in two phases: At one level, the abuser emphasizes how inadequate and out of touch is his partner’s own understanding of the world:

• She’s continually bleating on about nothing.

Legitimate complaints are re-classified as “bleating,” “nagging,” or “whining.” Her way of looking at the world is dismissed as based on a less adequate view of reality:

• I’m tired of her incessant nagging.
• Women are so irrational and over-emotional.
• She’s over-reacting again.

At another level, the need for re-education is developed by statements that redefine his abusive behavior as an unfortunate but necessary means for helping her connect with the way the world truly operates:

• I did it for her own good.
• She needs to learn what’s what.
• Someone has to keep her in line.

In this way, the abuser’s failure to distinguish personal from universal claims enables him to view his violence as a constructive act and as potentially beneficial to his victim.

1.4. Appropriating pronouns. Abusers frequently speak in ways that assume authority over their partners’ experience. For example:

• We shouldn’t be arguing.
The “should” refers to expectations somehow derived from an unspecified and external source. It suggests the abuser has access to levels of authority that are fixed and universal. The “we” adds to this impression; the choice of pronouns in the third person plural (“we,” “us,” “our”) rather than first person singular (“I,” “me,” “mine”) converts statements of personal belief into statements of universal truth. It assumes the partner’s inclusion and thereby helps to further enclose her reality. Consider some further examples:

- We’re both very stubborn people.
- Our mistake was to give women the vote.
- We don’t believe in that any more.

In these statements, the speaker’s “we” assumes entitlement to assessing the reality for both him and his partner. Other pronouns can achieve a similar effect. Generalized pronouns such as “it” or “one” can give an even stronger impression of a universal truth:

- It takes two to tango.
- It would be better to go now.
- One should try to avoid conflict.

A similar variant involves the use imperatives to avoid using any pronouns:

- Be positive.
- Don’t give up hope.
- Try to do what’s right.

Who says whether one should be positive or do what is right? When combined with the possibility of physical or emotional retribution, the use of linguistic strategies to hide the origin of the belief can serve to prescribe behaviors and beliefs that suit the interests of the abuser (for more discussion on these and other devices, see our research in Adams et al., 2003).

1.5. Contracting options. A distinctive feature in the way male abusers discuss their violence is the all-or-nothing position in which they describe themselves. Following a build up to violence, and just before acting, the abuser can find himself at a “moment of fatal peril” (Sinclair, 1987, p. 9); a perception of total threat that his whole person is at risk if he does not act immediately. Similarly, his language commonly depicts situations in terms of extremes:

- Either I win or I lose.

He casts himself as caught between a position of total passivity and a position of heroic resolve. As he has difficulty distinguishing constructions of personal reality from constructions of a universal reality, he will confidently believe in his own perspective and consequently has no need to entertain other options:

- I couldn’t possibly back down.
- Someone’s got to wear the pants.
- There is no middle ground.

The language re-emphasizes to his partner that her choice is one of either conforming or one of being abused. Options in between (discussion, negotiation, compromise, etc.) are dismissed as futile:

- What’s the point in talking.
- She never sees it my way.
- Give an inch and she’ll take a mile.

This language of extremes shapes a world of black-and-white, praise-and-blame, success-and-failure; the language helps to progressively enclose the woman within rigid walls of inflexibility and absolutes.

Level 2: Neutralizing Appropriating Messages

First-contact interventions risk disengagement when talk is perceived as confronting a man’s total reality, but at the same time contact needs to proceed in ways that minimize the chance of colluding with justifications for violence. Opportunities to reduce collusion include the following:
2.1. **Spotting minimizations and justifications.** Group programs offer many opportunities for challenging minimizations and justifications particularly when they are explained to participants right from the start and backed up with encouragement to monitor each other’s use as they go. We have found that men’s ability to identify language that contains embedded minimizations and justifications typically improves as a program proceeds. Similarly, in individual and couple sessions, these concepts can be carefully introduced and explained, then referenced later as instances occur in their talk. For example, in providing an account of violence a group participant might claim, “Pressure built up and up until I just lost it.” The facilitator or other group members might then ask, “How come it occurred when no one else was around?” or “If you ‘lost it,’ why did you only injure her in places that would be covered by clothing?” In this way, his call on the language of loss of control appears both to him and to others as progressively less viable.

2.2. **Monitoring the use of pronouns.** As explored earlier, pronouns can play a significant role in disguised claims of overriding and appropriating authority over a women’s perspective. Practitioners need to watch for ambiguities in the abuser’s use of pronouns and, when spotted, invite men to convert suggestions of universality into statements of personal preference. For example, when a man claims, “Men find it difficult to share feelings,” the practitioner might ask, “You find it difficult to share your feelings?” or when he states “We (i.e., me and my partner) need to communicate better,” the response could be, “Do you wish to communicate better?”

2.3. **Insisting on double-sided descriptions of power and powerlessness.** Men bring to services their own stories of vulnerability and powerlessness. Practitioners can play a role in drawing out these accounts by ensuring that whenever incidents of abuse are discussed, the man is also invited to explore what it might mean to have been the recipient of such abuse. In group discussions about abuse, there is usually at least one person present who can provide relevant accounts of their own experiences of being abused. In individual and couple sessions this is more difficult, but the practitioner can assist by eliciting unrelated experience of unsafe vulnerability.

2.4. **Requiring full, accurate, and self-contained descriptions of abuse.** The significance of abuse is often played down by reference to greater social problems outside the relationship. For example, the man might state, “I only yelled at her, which is nothing compared to what other men are doing to women.” The practitioner could then request that comparisons are not drawn with events outside the relationship and for him to, “Stick with what you did.” He is then invited to be more precise: What posture did he use? Did his movements imply threat? Where was he standing? Did he block the door? Had shouting ever been linked to physical violence in the past? The practitioner then invites him to explore the impact of his shouting on his partner. This continues until his description acknowledges the reasonableness of her fear and sense of threat.

2.5. **Ensuring direct and unfiltered access to a women’s voice.** Counseling and group programs run exclusively by men risk replicating the very same processes, which abusers use to interpret and redefine the experience of women. The participation of woman at an early stage in engagement is important in safeguarding against male-only ways of speaking and interpreting events. The presence of an authentic women’s voice can be achieved by women participating as co-facilitators in group programs or as co-counselors in couple and individual sessions. In circumstances where this is impractical, session content can be monitored by women in subsequent gender supervision sessions. The contribution of women can also provide a degree of impact and immediacy to descriptions of how a woman might experience controlling behavior. It enables improved challenging of negative beliefs about women and clear modeling of communication enables participants to observe constructive and open ways of dealing with conflict (Dunford, 2000; O’Leary, Heyman, & Neidig, 1999). The client is presented with a woman’s perspective that both differs from his own and has not
been filtered by experiences of intimidation and fear. The woman co-facilitator can also provide safe feedback systems whereby partner descriptions of the effects of abuse are presented to the group in ways that avoid typical minimizations and justifications.

**Level 3: Engaging in Expressions of Personal Reality**

A key part of engaging men in the prospect of change involves assisting them in recognizing that challenges to how they approach relationships do not need to involve negating them as whole human beings. This requires some degree of validation of their personal realities while at the same time distancing these from justifications, appropriations, and other claims at universal authority. Validation here is by necessity a careful process; what is validated requires close referencing and ideally should be monitored with regard to women’s perspectives. Examples of these strategies include:

3.1. *Distinguishing intent from effect.* Goldner (1998, 1999) has developed a range of strategies for engaging men in discussions regarding their violence. One such strategy involves distinguishing between what the abuser intended to achieve and the actual effect of his abuse on his partner. For example, a man might talk of the intention behind his abuse as, “trying to hold the relationship together,” and at the same time, he might recognize the effect of his behavior as, “only managing to terrify the whole family.” This separation of intent from effect enables him to talk of his inner thoughts and feelings without using them to justify his behavior.

3.2. *Affirming nonthreatening expressions of emotion.* The main aim in encouraging emotional expressions is to shift emphasis away from appropriating language and assumptions of overriding authority. For many men, counseling and groups offer them their first opportunities for unguarded expressions of both positive and negative emotion. It helps him recover the rich variety of feelings and values that usually pass unnoticed or ill-defined. For example, when a man attending a group program describes an angry response to work-colleagues, the facilitator could ask for more specificity: Was he “jealous,” “threatened,” “frustrated,” or “feeling insecure”? If he was feeling threatened, “who threatened” him and “about what”? The participant gradually learns to both monitor and speak more clearly about his feelings which in turn reinforce both the existence and value of his own personal reality.

3.3. *Engaging in talk of personal priorities and values.* Abusers’ accounts of powerlessness are compounded by the all-or-nothing effects from collapsing their personal reality into overriding universal perspectives. Discussion of values and priorities helps to uncover the constructed nature of these rigid perspectives and through the processes of listening and reflecting, assists in introducing shades of gray into their interpretations. For instance, when a man wonders whether he might reorient his career to enable closer involvement with family, the practitioner might ask, “Well, what really matters to you?” After more discussion, he might conclude, “What matters most to me is first my family, next achievement in my work, and next keeping good health.” In subsequent discussions and with input from other people, he might choose to modify or identify more specific priorities than these. The repeated questioning of values and priorities foregrounds the significance and variability of personal choice and personal values, and undermines attachments to a rigid and universalized hierarchy of values.

3.4. *Reviewing personal motives for future action.* An explicit enquiry into personal motives can assist abusers in recognizing the importance of personal perspectives and discouraging them from claiming super-ordinate justifications for decisions. For example, a man might explain his reason for contesting a protection order as, “It’s not right to be accused of these things without the opportunity of defense.” The practitioner, responding to the universality in the claim “it’s not right,” could request him to expand further on what he means. He might respond by describing fears that his partner will use the protection order as a threat in any future disagreement. The discussion could then turn to acknowledging that while his fears are valid, they do
not justify restricting his partner's access to protection which may increase her sense of safety.

3.5. **Clarifying personal boundaries and responsibilities.** As he increases his awareness of his own personal reality, he also becomes more capable of reviewing boundaries and responsibilities associated with that reality. This self-reflective ability has consequences for communicating within intimate relationships, particularly in learning to receive criticism, in avoiding taking automatic responsibility for another person’s emotional reactions, and in letting others express negative feelings. For example, during a session a man might claim, “It started when she was mad at me for coming home late...” to which the counselor might enquire, “But that doesn’t mean you need to get angry. Perhaps she had reason to be mad? It doesn’t follow that you need to react the same.” He is thereby encouraged to constantly monitor the source of his negative emotions and to make early decisions on the legitimacy of his reactions.

**Future Development**

This paper has examined several ways in which the language of male partner abusers contains both the mechanisms for continuing their abuse and opportunities for change. At the point of first contact, practitioners are faced with managing a fine balance between the twin hazards of colluding with the violence and alienating the client. The strategies discussed above outline some of the many ways to recognize when language is being used to appropriate the experience of others, on ways to prevent this from happening, and on ways to engage men in the processes of realization and change. While these strategies are congruent with previous research, they have originated from client practice and have yet to be researched in outcome studies. Future investigation could expand on the detail regarding the subtle ways men use language to enclose and appropriate the reality of women. Other studies could investigate the effectiveness of ways of neutralizing appropriating language and the effects for both the man his partner of encouraging nonappropriating expression of personal realities.

**REFERENCES**


