Transforming Men Who Batter into Men Who Matter

Michael Chovanec, Ph.D., College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas

This narrative is a reflection on the author's past twenty years of work with men who batter. The issues of engaging abusive men, challenging abusive behavior, and modeling respectful use of power are examined from both a programmatic and personal level. Key ideas gained over the years from engaging these men in their struggle to change are offered.

At our weekly group session, composed of men who have been working on examining their abusive behavior, I ask for volunteers in the group to see who would like to present one of their completed tasks. Mike reluctantly agrees. Mike has been in the group for four or five sessions. He was initially court-ordered into the program after an argument with his girlfriend escalated to his "reaching" for her neck. She became frightened and called police. As one of our current group members, he is one of the men who are most unhappy about being in the group. While he acknowledges that he should not have grabbed his girlfriend's neck, and admits to feeling bad about what he did, he states he wants to move on and doesn't think he needs the group. He claims, "I'll never do that again." His anger is easy to read, and his glare when he gets upset in group, I believe, keeps people at a distance. But to his credit, this is the first task he has volunteered to present.

Mike: Yes, I guess I can go. I have the control plan. (He passes out copies of his task to the other group members including the facilitator.)

Facilitator: Why don't you give us an example of getting to the high end of your anger scale.

Mike: Well, I found out that my girlfriend had stolen my mother's charge card. I just happened to see a billing notice from the credit card company that listed a large amount of women's negligees charged to my mother's account.

Facilitator: Can you tell us your emotional cues?

Mike: I felt betrayed.

Facilitator: What else? (I pass a feeling chart to him for his review.)

Mike: (Gives me the "glare.") I don't know. I feel bad enough about the incident, why do I have to explore every gory detail? I don't even know these guys (in the group) or you.

Another group member: Yeah, but we are all in the same boat.

Facilitator: I encourage men to identify a variety of feelings. In the past, men in the group have told me that identifying and tracking a variety of feelings can help make it less likely they will act on those feelings in the future.

Mike: What degrees do you have anyway? Why should I believe you?

Facilitator: (Finding myself getting angry.) I have a Bachelor's, Master's and a Ph.D. in Social Work, but the number of degrees won't help you trust me.

Mike: I feel you are just trying to put words in my mouth.

Another veteran group member jumps in: I hear him *asking* you, not *telling* you how you feel.

Mike: OK. (taking the feeling chart) I was feeling hurt, betrayed, and full of rage, how dare she do that to my mother!

Facilitator: Good job. Now I've got a better understanding of what was going on for you at that time. Let's take a break.

It all began twenty years ago when my county supervisor asked for a "brave volunteer" to take over as facilitator of a domestic abuse program for men. The initial facilitator had left the program after starting the program a few weeks earlier. I was hoping it wasn't the group experience that prompted his quick decision to leave the agency. At that point, the only experience I had working with abusive men was dealing with my dad's verbally abusive outbursts growing up. This family experience had taught me how to be quiet yet stay engaged in the exchange. I was ambivalent about taking on the facilitator role, both fearing the experience would be similar to what I had growing up, yet also wanting to understand the anger and how I could be helpful to these men in the change process. I took the challenge and have evolved in my role as domestic abuse facilitator. At the time I didn't realize the impact this work would have on me both professionally and personally in my relationship with my dad. Over the years, I have transitioned from full-time county social worker to part-time county social worker and full time faculty member at a local university. I have had the good fortune to function both as group facilitator and program coordinator, allowing me full opportunity to design the program as I saw fit.

The Program

Originally the program closely mirrored the "confrontational" approach supported in the literature (Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Pence & Paymar, 1993) at that time. Since those early days, the program has been modified to include a "kinder and gentler" approach without, of course, condoning abusive behavior. I needed to find a way of incorporating my laid back style with challenging the abusive behavior. The majority of men who are referred to the program are either court-ordered or are feeling pressure to attend from others, i.e., partner, attorney. A wide variety of men have passed through the program over the years. While the typical client has been white, in his mid-twenties, and in an economically lower income bracket, I have had Asian, African-American, and Hispanic group members, ages eighteen to sixty-five years old, from all walks of life, running the gamut from unemployed to a patent specialist.

The program consists of an open-ended group whose size has ranged from four to twelve men who meet weekly one evening a week for two hours. In order to complete the program, men accomplish a series of tasks and attend a designated number of sessions. Men need to complete structured assignments that are designed to challenge them regarding specific issues related to domestic abuse. The program started at twelve sessions and five tasks and has grown to eighteen sessions and eight tasks. Each session includes an educational topic designed to provide men with communication skills and alternatives to abuse when they are angry. One of the first tasks men complete is an assignment that requires men to identify the cues that have triggered abusive behavior in past conflict. Next they develop a plan for taking a time-out when arguments escalate out of control. The approach taken in this program seems to be effective; the program is flourishing and at the current time there are ten men involved and there is a waiting list.

Dropouts/Was It Something I Said?

One of the earlier challenges for me was the number of men who would drop out of the program. I always wondered whether it was something I said. Many nights I would anticipate a group of five to eight men and wind up with only two to three. My fear of incompetence and curiosity about group process led to consulting with co-workers who would say "those guys are just difficult to work with." After one year of conducting the group, I continued to struggle with the issue of dropouts and/or no shows. It was then that I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in social work. Because of my focus on this aspect of group, it was a simple decision to choose attrition in domestic abuse treatment as my research project. This would allow me to get "all the answers" and get a Ph.D. at the same time! In reading the literature on attrition in domestic abuse treatment, I found out I was not alone in my struggle. Attrition for domestic abuse programs ranges from 22% to 99% depending on the evaluation point in the treatment process

(Daly & Pelowski, 2000). In one study examining attrition from initial contact to treatment completion, only 10% of men completed the program (Gondolf & Foster, 1991).

What I learned in completing my dissertation was that attrition is a major problem in the field and that there are multiple factors that impede men in their completion of treatment. My study suggested that men who were employed, had higher incomes, witnessed abuse between parents, did not participate in chemical dependency treatment and were court-ordered were more likely to complete treatment (Chovanec, 1995). Another finding from my study and confirmed in my practice experience suggested that men who were more highly reactant at orientation were more likely to complete treatment. Reactance pertains to men's reactions to feeling forced into treatment. Interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, men who were most angry about being referred were more likely to complete the program.

In my experience, if the anger men present with is identified by the group facilitator and redirected into helping them get something out of the program for themselves, they remain in the program. For example, Mike, whose narrative I relayed, was extremely angry about being referred to the program, as evidenced by his behavior. But consistent with my research findings, he stayed the full eighteen weeks and completed the program. My finding was not confirmed in the literature since I could not find any other studies that examined reactance in a domestic abuse setting. However, my study's finding offered more suggestions for responding to men initially in the program, i.e., strategies to reduce or increase reactance. Also I think that these additional strategies gave me ways I could be more active with the men I worked with and find a way to adjust my laid-back style learned growing up with my dad to better respond to anger men presented in group.

Just like most learning processes, I realized how much I didn't know rather than finding an answer. Yet, I continued to work with the men in my groups, reflect on my work, and gather literature that applied to my work. My dropout rate has become less significant over the years. In the past two years, from April 2004 thru April 2006, out of forty-one men that have started the program, six men, or 14.6%, have not completed the program (Chovanec, 2006b). It has been hard to tell whether the reduction in attrition is the result of my changes as a facilitator, program changes I have implemented, or a combination of the two.

Traditional Domestic Abuse Treatment / Power and Control Issues

The Duluth model based on the psycho-educational program developed in Duluth, Minnesota (Pence & Paymar, 1993) is probably the most widely applied in domestic abuse programs. The model defines abuse broadly to include emotional and economic abuse and the use of intimidation, coercion and/or threats. The basic assumption is that men primarily abuse women to maintain power and control in a patriarchal society (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Abusive behaviors are believed to be choices that men intentionally make to maintain their power and control. These abusive behaviors are seen as supported by gender and familial roles, social institutions, and men's belief systems (Pope & Ferraro, 2004). The facilitator role includes holding men accountable for their abuse, keeping the group discussion on issues of violence, abuse, and control, and challenging, not colluding, with men's abusive belief system (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Pence and Paymar suggest challenging abusive beliefs early in treatment and not colluding with men and their abusive beliefs. "Whatever the reasons, most abusers deny or minimize their behavior. That is why it is vitally important for the facilitator to confront these statements whenever they occur [i.e., "I lost

control," "I just snapped," "She pushed too far."] (Pence & Paymar, 1993. pp.77)

Personal Changes/The Struggle to Model Respectful Use of Power

From the beginning, I have struggled with the confrontational style suggested in most traditional domestic abuse programs. As mentioned earlier, my response to anger growing up was to be quiet but to stay engaged. Thus the confrontational approach was more difficult for me to implement. While I agree that men need to be held responsible for their abusive behavior, how and when men get challenged to change their behavior is the key. In the early years I found myself either being too quiet or challenging every abusive comment men made early on in the treatment process. As a result I got into power struggles with the men in the group. While I was trying to get them to acknowledge their intentional use of abusive behavior, they viewed themselves as victims. I wonder now whether or not my being too quiet or confronting too early led to the greater attrition rates my early groups experienced and that are currently prevalent in the attrition research (Daly & Pelowski, 2000).

The majority of men entering the program have had extensive experience witnessing abusive power in their past. Personality disorders and men with history of severe child abuse are common in this population (DeHart, Kennerly, Burke, & Follingstad, 1999; Faulkner, Cogan, Nolder, & Shooter, 1991) (Hamberger & Hastings, 1989; Hamberger, Lohr, & Gottlieb, 2000). Because I had the power to determine whether court ordered men successfully completed the program, was I not just modeling a similar demonstration of abusive power through the power struggles in my effort to get men to change?

Over time, I learned how to listen and to become more active within the group, selective in how and when I challenged the men in the group. I realized that men seem to respond more positively once they have observed and heard others in the group talk about their change efforts. I indirectly challenge the men about their abusive behavior early in their treatment. This involves the other men who are further along in the change process who validate and confront the new group members in ways that as facilitator I cannot. I tend to challenge men later in the program and particularly when they begin presenting their tasks. As indicated in the initial narrative, group members challenged Mike first and then I pointed out the issue of trust that was limiting our progress. The key was that Mike and I were able to stay engaged in dialog even when he was opposed to working on the task. Challenging men too quickly about their abusive behavior can set up an environment of power and control within the group. I then can use my power as the facilitator in the program to "force" change. As I've grown to see it, my job is to model a more respectful way of using my power that both challenges and supports men as they contemplate changing their abusive behavior.

I have also begun to better anticipate the hostility men present towards me as the group facilitator and towards "the system" over the years. Reactance theory has been helpful here. As previously mentioned, reactance is a way of assessing men's perception of coercion upon entering a domestic abuse program. The theory suggests that men will react in predictable ways when feeling coerced, one of which is hostility towards the group facilitator (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Anticipating men's hostility has allowed me to be less reactive and more thoughtful in my response. One useful practice response to reactance is giving the client choices and clarifying negotiable and non-negotiable issues. When I find myself getting angry in session, I focus on listening to the individual and not judging myself too harshly in the exchange. Allowing myself not to panic about getting stuck with an individual is the key. Although I found myself getting angry with Mike, I was able to focus on our exchange rather than to become critical of my efforts to engage him, fearing that I was not getting through to him. One's own self-talk is key in maintaining efforts to engage men in the change process. Caplan and Thomas (2002) provide useful advice in managing the exchange between facilitator and group member and avoiding the

negative self-talk that facilitators tend to engage in when working with difficult group members.

Another change in my work with men has been my effort to listen for themes men present within group rather than focus on their resistance to change. By paying more attention to process and less on the content of men's stories, I can avoid power struggles and men rambling on in the group. With Mike, for example, I tried to point out the trust issue that had presented itself several times before he had presented his task. Thomas and Caplan (1999) have developed a process model in working with abusive men that I have used as a guide to assist me in this work. They divide intervention into three major categories: 1.) the group facilitator uses *process* interventions to identify the emotional message behind the client's statement and reflects the client's worldview. Common emotional themes found in domestic abuse perpetrators' stories include betrayal, abandonment, and powerlessness; 2.) another category of intervention is called *linking*. These interventions are used to connect individual client issues with others in the group and allow the group leader to make generalized statements about the group itself; 3.) and last, are *inclusion* interventions. They encourage uninvolved group members to join the group discussion and include didactic and projective exercises that allow group members to voice their opinion without being singled out. These interventions allow me to avoid power struggles with the men and build group cohesion and a sense of community within the group. When men start to complain about the "system," I listen for process themes that are underlying their complaining. For example, if a man complains about his wife, I will listen for underlying themes that can include feeling disrespected or powerless. If possible I then try to link these themes to others in the group that have similar struggles and ask how they have coped with these issues. With the open-ended group, veterans can offer their support and ideas. This further reduces the risk of the group discussion turning into a power struggle or complaint session.

Program Changes

As program coordinator, I also had the freedom to make changes in the program. I now pay more attention to orienting new members to the group. Based on two studies that suggest that orientation reduces attrition in domestic abuse treatment (Brekke, 1989; Tolman & Bhosley, 1987) and my own intuition, more time is spent in intake sessions. I address common fears in orientation such as, "You are going to force me to change," or "You will judge me." Also addressed are questions such as, "What can I expect from being in this group?" Schwartz (1976) and Shulman (1999) proposed developing an opening statement for voluntary groups that addresses initial fears and concerns of members entering group. My comments as the facilitator help to engage men before they even speak.

I also pay attention to how and when men enter the program. Schopler and Galinksy (2005) suggest thinking of cohorts of group members moving through open- ended groups. I usually have two or more men start at the same time once a month and have created a ritual of entry with "veteran" members introducing themselves first, presenting the incident that brought them in, citing progress on their own personal goals and stating how they think the new members feel about being there. The veterans also review the group rules with the new members. I have found this ritual helps manage my anxiety as well as the new members' anxiety and allows the "veteran" men to take more ownership of the group process. Having men guess at how new men feel about being in the group allows practice of empathy skills and, I think, helps new members feel accepted.

I still use many of the standard domestic abuse tasks, such as the control plan and taking responsibility for their most violent incident assignment (Domestic Abuse Project, 1993). These tasks challenge men to take responsibility for their abuse and identify the triggers that escalate conflicts.

Over the years, I have added a role-play task in which men are asked later in the program to identify a potential conflict with significant others in their life. Significant others have included partners, bosses, and probation

officers. Men are asked in a written assignment to fully anticipate their reactions if they were to be in contact with the other individual, identifying triggers that get them upset and what strategies they will use to calm themselves down. The men bring to group their written assignment that is then role played, with the significant other played by either me, or my co-facilitator. First, men clarify the potential conflict and their purpose in talking with the other individual. If I hear an agenda of control or revenge for a previous hurt, men are asked to either revise their plans or postpone them. Feedback from the group also helps men clarify their purpose. Then men are asked to review what cues they anticipate being triggered and how they anticipate responding to triggers to remain calm in the exchange. The group is divided, with half of the men assisting the group member with ideas on how to respond to his significant other in the role-play and the other half helping the facilitator in brainstorming ideas the group member might expect in the exchange from his significant other. The goal is to think of all of the actions/comments that potentially could get the group member upset. The role play is conducted and stopped periodically to give the man feedback on his presentation. Finally the man is asked how confident he is in contacting the other person and discussing his concerns in an assertive, non-abusive fashion. Thought is given to whether that contact should be in person or on the phone, with the safety of both individuals the primary concern. In cases where an order for protection prevents men from having contact with their partners, men role play the exchange they would anticipate and then are asked to write a letter to their ex-partner. The letter is not sent. Instead the group reviews the letter and provides feedback to the man completing the task.

The task breaks from traditional domestic abuse programs in that rather than focus on men's past abusive incidents, the focus is helping men be proactive in applying communications skills they have learned in the program to potential problems in their current lives. While I anticipate some feminists may claim that I am putting women at risk by encouraging men to assert themselves with significant others, I believe that the risk of potential abuse is much higher if these future conflicts are avoided. With careful preparation in developing the task, men and their partners can benefit if men are given the opportunity to be proactive about future conflict and practice assertive skills that channel their anger in productive ways. The task builds skills in assertiveness and allows us to see how the individual responds to potential risks. What better place to see a group member's reaction to conflict than in the group. The task helps men anticipate future challenges and how to think through their approach to the problem. In addition, the task builds cohesion in the group as men are the experts in knowing what to expect. To date reports from the men are very positive. However, the researcher inside me knows these are self-reports and a more formal evaluation of the task is needed.

Diverging from Traditional Domestic Abuse Treatment:

Over the years there were several factors that I think have contributed to my ability to change and grow in my development as a domestic abuse group facilitator. These changes at times diverged from the traditional domestic abuse treatment approach. First of all, I had free rein to design the program as I saw best. Thus I have had less pressure to conform to a given model. In fact, I borrowed from a variety of programs. Secondly, my clinical background as a family therapist and as a group worker prior to learning about domestic abuse treatment allowed me to be open to a variety of ways of intervening with abusive men with focus on the change process. The traditional approach focuses on stopping abuse through a psycho-educational approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993). My

training also helped me to simultaneously engage men individually and make use of group process. For example with Mike, while I was directly challenging him to elaborate on his description of the abusive incident, I also relied on group members to engage him as well. Lastly, I have also been able to reflect on my work through supervision and sharing with colleagues. In my current faculty role, I have multiple roles by which to examine my work, i.e., presenting case examples to my students, writing papers, or making presentations.

Why I do the Work

When people ask what work I do, typically they are amazed that I have worked with "those angry men" for so many years. I think there are a number of reasons I have found myself working with this population for so long. First, I think I have always enjoyed the challenge of working with people others cannot tolerate. I always tell people that all "those men" were babies at one time, and that I need to separate the abusive behavior from the man. I feel strongly that we as a community need to continually challenge the stereotypes of both men and women who are in abusive relationships.

Secondly, this work has given me the opportunity to learn about my own emotional process and how I deal with my own rage or angry feelings. In this work, one cannot escape this issue as men typically present with anger and frustration as they enter the program. I needed to find a way to model expressing anger without putting others down. I needed to develop a respectful way of using my power in the group without mirroring the power and control environment with which many of the men referred to the program are familiar.

Third, accepting my teaching position in 1996 has allowed me to reflect on my work in the classroom. Challenging stereotypes of "those men" allows my passion to carry over into the classroom. The wide range of stories I provide about these men referred to domestic abuse treatment help students to see that abusive behavior is only one element of these men's lives. In class, we discuss how the stigma of labels, in this case "abusive men," impact their ability to change and their lives outside of the group. Also, students find it helpful to examine how men who are abusive present emotions and how workers can effectively respond to these emotions. Anger is typically a difficult emotion for students as well as professionals. Anger presented by clients, as well as dealing with one's own anger that gets triggered in the exchange, is a major challenge. For example, when teaching group work skills, I may role play a domestic abuse group with students volunteering to role play a variety of abusive men. Most students report they found the role play a useful starting point in examining the use of self in addressing anger issues clients present. Examining how to respond to anger in a respectful way without condoning problem behaviors is a universal skill needed by all social workers.

Finally, I think one cannot do this type of work for so many years without having it touch one on a very personal level. My own issues with my dad have been part of the driving force to continually explore this work. Dad, particularly in his early years, could have been identified with many of the same characteristics that the "fighters" in my group have. Learning how to express anger in an assertive and respectful way without disengaging has been a life task for me, and this learning has carried over into my work with these men. Over the years I have evolved my view of "those men" and my dad from initial fear and resentment to compassion. This change in perspective not only has improved my relationship with my dad but also has improved my work with the men in my group, allowing me to work with this population as long as I have.

The Top Ten Ideas I have Learned from Men Who Batter

Over the last nineteen years, the men I work with have taught me a lot. I have been honored that many have shown their vulnerability as they struggled to deal with the abusive incident that brought them to the group and make efforts to change. The following are ten ideas these men have taught me over the years:

1) Confront your fears. I was terrified when I first began this work. The stereotypes of abusive men, i.e., always angry, intentionally abusive, out of control, can get in the way of connecting with these men. I needed courage and support to be able to separate the abusive behavior from the person. Examining my own fears in supervision and with colleagues allowed me to work with these men and help them examine their own fears, many times including their own fear of anger and being out of control.

2) Abusive men are more like me than not. In my early work I focused on the differences between myself and these men, such as diagnostic categories or individual characteristics. However, over the years I have realized that very little is different in regards to the process of anger and the underlying feelings. While our reaction time to getting angry may be different, the need to channel anger and other strong emotions is universal. The struggles in relationships, i.e., feeling isolated, finding companionship, and dealing with conflict, are also universal.

3) One needs to speak up when disrespected. I tend to be pretty laid-back, and over the years I have learned to become more active within group when people are being disrespectful. My actions include pointing out the pattern or process, getting other group member's input, or asking for alternative ways of expressing concerns. Usually I find that actions of disrespect are triggered by feelings of being disrespected and not being heard.

4) Dialog creates change. People cannot learn and grow in isolation. Staying engaged in the dialog with men who think differently from me is the biggest challenge. It is through the dialog of opposing beliefs that change occurs.

5) It is important to always acknowledge a person's experience *first* before challenging his perceptions. If not, people will react defensively to your challenge because they feel they are not being heard. However, it is the combination of acknowledging and challenging that creates change.

6) We can disagree and still talk. Nothing bad has to happen if we disagree. Many of the men in group, including myself, have experienced disagreement leading to painful or abusive situations. The group provides a safe environment where men can experience something different.

7) People can and will change given an opportunity to be heard. Change can occur at any point in time. My job is to be open to the possibility of change and look for the little steps towards change. Validating the small changes leads to more changes and momentum for change is created, like a snowball rolling down a snowy hill.

8) Being involuntary is a process not just an event. My experience tells me that the way men present initially within group is not how they present when they finish. In fact, the more I learn about how men look toward the end of treatment when successful, the less I feel I need to confront the abusive beliefs when they first come to group. I have patience that over time, with challenge and support from the group and me, those abusive beliefs will diminish. Also men who are court ordered to treatment are not always resistant to change. Many men have reported that the initial jail time prior to the court hearing was a "wake up" call for them, which gave them time to self-reflect and begin making change efforts before entering the group.

9) Past painful experiences can be catalyst for change. Some of our best "teachers" can be people that treated us poorly. My dad's temper became a catalyst for my personal growth and my skills as a group facilitator. For the men in my group, growing up in abusive families and wanting to have a more positive experience with their current families have been major motivating factors in their change efforts.

10) We are all doing the best we can at any given point in time. I need to be self-examining without being critical of myself. This process needs to carry over to my work with the men, being critical of the behavior without attacking the individual. My belief is that this type of environment is key in helping men examine themselves to take small steps toward change.

And the Work Continues

I continue my weekly group sessions and conduct intakes for men entering the program. In the last two years I have joined a collection of domestic abuse facilitators from the surrounding area to share what we are doing and to share ideas. I continue to bring in stories of men who struggle to change their abusive behavior and my efforts to respond in a helpful fashion. I remain curious about the change process for abusive men. I recently completed a qualitative study interviewing domestic abuse facilitators on how they help abusive men move through the change process. This has provided a valuable means of connecting with other professionals that are as passionate about this work as I am. I have discovered that my approach in group is not that different from more traditional programs (Chovanec, 2006). I also want to begin a more formal evaluation of my program, including focus on specific testing of interventions that have been developed. I am committed to improving my work with these men. I have come to strongly believe they deserve support and respectful challenge to make changes in their lives. Transforming men who batter to men who matter is important for the men, their families, and the community.

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Dr. Chovanec is an assistant professor at the College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul Minnesota. He is also licensed as a Clinical Social Worker, and Marriage and Family Therapist in the state of Minnesota. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: mgchovanec@stkate.edu.

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