

Evaluating Programs for Batterers

by **Brian Nichols**

We have witnessed a proliferation of batter intervention programs (BIPs) as society has begun to respond to battering. Such programs are a part of the community's attempt to end men's violence, and justifiably, communities want to know if they work. How does the community know if its BIP is successful? Men Stopping Violence has grappled with this issue since we first began interventions with men who batter in 1982.

Batterer programs are something of a mystery to their communities. Many in the community say they do not know "what goes on in there." Some worry that programs may provide a "break" for men who commit family violence offenses that is unavailable for other crimes. Others believe programs are essential, and a compassionate, innovative response to battering. Evaluation of BIPs is critical to the community's confidence. The goal of a BIP is to end men's violence against women. The most tempting way to evaluate its effectiveness is to determine whether BIP participants end their violence. Indeed, these men's change is critical to the lives of women, especially to their partners. However, there are a number of complications in using this approach.

What motivates change?

Men enter BIPs with a wide variety of prior experiences; therefore, measuring their change can take some twists and turns. Consider these two examples. Dennis, after hours of unsuccessfully badgering his partner to return home, shot at their child, describing to her over the phone what he was doing. Somehow the bullet missed the child, but his partner did not know this. When she heard the shot, she hung up the phone, quickly called her mother, and rushed to the house. Her mother called the police, and they all arrived at the scene at roughly the same time. The police told Dennis's partner to go inside and get the child. She did; and everyone left. No arrest was made. Apparently the police did register an informal complaint because the next day a Superior Court judge called an emergency hearing. The judge ruled that until Dennis completed "treatment," he would only be able to see the child with supervision.

The second example is about Rudd, who assaulted his partner and was arrested. From jail he called his boss to get bail money. In response, his boss literally pinned a note to a hat: "Rudd battered his wife last night and went to jail. Anybody want to give bail money?" and passed it through the factory. No one put any money in the hat, and Rudd stayed in jail until he pled guilty at trial. A part of his sentence was "treatment."

These different experiences brought Dennis and Rudd to our batterers intervention class and point to a different likelihood of change. For Dennis, minimal community response sent him the clear message that attempted murder is not truly serious in a family violence context. By attending a BIP, Dennis expects to dispose of the only consequence he received. He, therefore, has motivation to fake personal change, but little reason to actually change. By contrast, Rudd has reason to change. He has received a much clearer message, from both his peers and community authorities, that battering is wrong. He knows that he will experience additional negative consequences if he continues to batter.

These examples illustrate the fallacy of ascribing individual men's change, or lack thereof, to their enrollment in a BIP. If Dennis does not change, the community may hold the program responsible when, in fact, it is the poor response by the community that gave Dennis permission to terrorize his partner and child. If Rudd does change, the program may be given credit, when, in fact, the consequences he

experienced from the community are more likely what motivated him. The program can contribute to his change process, but is not solely - or even primarily - responsible for it.

How do we measure change?

Furthermore, methodological complications arise in trying to measure individual men's change. First, what will we define as successful change? Is it when he stops hitting? When he stops any unwanted physical contact? When he stops yelling and criticizing? When there are no more arrests? What length of time constitutes "stopping"? It is difficult to determine a point where battering has stopped. Battering requires fear, not any particular behavior. For one man "that look" is enough to terrify and control her, for another, physical force. So while it may be possible to measure whether a man has stopped using a specific tactic for a time, that won't demonstrate that he has stopped battering.

Second, how can we collect accurate information about his behavior? Denial and minimization are part and parcel of battering. It is rare for the perpetrator - or the victim (for different reasons) - to honestly disclose information about his abuse. We cannot trust the information they give us unless we assume they are in the position to report the truth. In this way, we must assume he has changed in order to measure it.

These challenges make the task of measuring individual men's change all but impossible. It may be somewhat surprising, and extremely disheartening to many, to conclude that measurements of individual men's change have such little value. When we accept this reality, we are left at our starting place. The goal is to end men's violence against women. How can programs for batterers be evaluated to assess their contributions to that goal if measuring individual men's change is not the answer?

The scope of battering

The estimated female population in Georgia in 1996 was 3,770,216. According to the Georgia Women's Health Survey, six percent of Georgia women are physically assaulted annually by an intimate partner, and thirty percent of women over their lifetime. Thus, statewide it is projected that 226,213 women of reproductive age experience physical assaults each year, and 1,113,064 over the course of their lifetime. This survey disregarded sexual and emotional assaults and crimes against older women.

These statistics point toward an understanding of battering as a problem of populations, not of individual men. Between 50 and 80 men enroll in MSV's BIP each year. If they all "stopped battering" - and we could measure that - we would clearly have a false sense of progress toward the goal of ending battering in Georgia. Therefore, we must look closely at the roots of battering to get at an appropriate way to measure progress.

Roots of battering

The experience of working with thousands of men, along with feedback from battered women and their advocates, has taught us that men's physical and sexual attacks against women are by choice. No one and no circumstances can make a man attack his partner verbally or physically. There are circumstances that may increase the likelihood that a man will batter, but no circumstance makes it an inevitable choice. Men, rather than circumstances or interpersonal relations, are responsible for their abusive behaviors. Thus, an accurate explanation of battering must account for his desire to control her and his willingness to use violence to achieve that control.

As a homework assignment we asked men to respond to the question, "When I do not feel superior, do I feel inadequate, and am I more dangerous?" One man, Greg, wrote: Yes, in certain situations I feel inadequate - when I am not in control over work matters, family matters and financial matters. Society has taught me that I'm less of a man if I can't control my family or financial matters. And yes, I feel I am more dangerous when I'm not in control. I get emotionally dangerous, because I will use intimidation, verbal threats, and raise my voice to gain control over certain situations. Many men, those who batter and those

who have not, experience this desire to control women. Thus, battering and rape are generally acknowledged to be about power and control. Men's violence is designed to achieve a specific result.

One type of abuse Greg regularly chose was criticism and yelling. For instance, when he got home from work one day, his partner said, "Why don't we go out to eat?" Greg yelled, "You never fucking cook anymore! If you want to go out, go ahead. I'll make something to eat here and leave you a damn mess." In class, Greg quickly identified the control part of his abuse: he wanted to get his partner to stay home and cook. It took longer for him to see the derogatory beliefs behind that need to control, but eventually he realized that he believes women are lazy and take for granted all the work men do to support the family. Thus, when Greg made the choice to yell at his partner, he wanted her to feel guilty and conquered. For him, that validated his sense of superiority.

Degrading and contemptuous beliefs about women lead to the assumption that men should be in control. Men who batter are generally more aware of their desire for control than they are of the contemptuous beliefs they have about women. For instance, when a man believes that women are frivolous with money and cannot spend it wisely, he is likely to make abusive choices based on that belief. His abuse may consist of withholding money, insisting that he receive receipts for the money she spends, or slapping or yelling at her for purchasing an item. Whatever abuse a man may choose, it is his negative belief and resulting drive for control that are the source for his abuse. It is like a cascade. Men's choices to abuse are at the bottom of the cascade, and flow logically from the negative beliefs about women and the desire to control that lie above.

A last story about Greg. A few weeks after his abuse recounted above, he was in the grocery store buying tampons. The man behind him in the checkout line, who had never met Greg before, said to him, "What are you, henpecked?" The message in his statement is that Greg is being controlled by a woman, and therefore is less of a man. This statement is one of the countless daily messages men send and receive indicating that they should control women. In this case, the stranger was reminding Greg that his social status as a man depends upon other men experiencing him as in control of "his" woman. This sheds some light on why so many men choose to batter. As long as men's status depends on their being in control of women, large numbers of men will batter. Battering is, therefore, a social problem based on social norms of male supremacy and backed by the power to enforce those norms.

A new look at evaluation

This understanding of battering has implications for how to evaluate BIPs. When we see battering as the expression of social norms of male supremacy and control, then individual men's decisions to batter manifest that problem. Indeed, until social norms are changed, a BIP's classroom work will be engaged in teaching men to resist those norms. Measurements of individual men's change can at best reflect their increasing resistance to social norms. Clearly, an appropriate evaluation strategy must measure a BIP's impact on the shift of social norms that are at the root of men's violence against women.

Recall the stories of Dennis and Rudd and the role community accountability played in their experiences. Community accountability is key to generating an end to battering. Therefore the BIP's true function is to transform communities so that they consistently respond to men's violence against women as they did with Rudd rather than as they did with Dennis. Only then are they carrying out their charge to end men's violence against women.

Cautionary note: The foregoing is not to imply that batterers programs should not be required to adhere to strict standards, which many states have implemented with the assistance of battered women's advocates. Otherwise they can significantly increase the danger to women.

As uptake was going to press, we received this message from a woman visiting our web site: "A Superior Court Judge just handed unsupervised visitation back to a man who has beaten both children (one of whom is only 5) and me repeatedly in the past. (After a therapist testified that this child would be in danger without supervision). My ex was ordered by the same Judge to attend your program, but he did not attend one session, nor did the Judge enforce his previous order."