

## **Unpacking Provocation**

by **Red Crowley**

### **Isolating the Problem**

The accusation that women provoke men's violence against them predates the battered women's movement. This sense of provocation is so firmly entrenched in social consciousness that until it is meaningfully addressed, a remedy for battering will remain elusive. Women's provocation of men's violence becomes a point of focus (either for denial or for confirmation) for participants at virtually every Men Stopping Violence presentation. Impatiently they struggle through our Opening and Introduction searching for a crack in the monologue where they can insert the fundamental question, "Who batters and why?" The urgency to have this question answered speaks to the strength of our resolve to eliminate this pressing social problem. We feel that if we can determine who or what is responsible for the problem, we can go about crafting solutions. We search for causes and attempt to determine responsibility. Such work is the logical first step to creating change. Our personal experiences have validated this problem-solving strategy.

Simply stated, our thesis might be that if  $x$  causes  $y$  in the population, then to eliminate  $y$ , we must eradicate  $x$ . However, the complexities of life cannot be expressed by this simple deductive formula. Problems occur in a social context. So when we go about seeking remedies to a problem, we naturally derive solutions based on our understanding of that problem and its context.

If  $y$  is Lyme disease, hunches as to the cause,  $x$ , will likely differ depending on whether those addressing the problem are ethnologists, evangelists, epidemiologists, attorneys, biologists, politicians, neurologists, etc. Here the social context in which the problem exists guides our line of inquiry and directs us to a recognized authority for the generation of possible causes as well as solutions. Often the track record of a given profession gives it a kind of established credibility and an authority to define the problem and identify possible solutions. Thus, in the example above, evangelists and politicians would not generally have the defining authority that epidemiologists and biologists would in our culture.

Addressing any problem involves reckoning with this complex interaction of the problem itself, the social context, and the authority to frame the problem and to identify acceptable solutions. Often our strategy for understanding what and why yields quite straightforward and effective results: Once epidemiologists and biologists determined that blacklegged deer ticks carry and spread Lyme disease, they knew where to focus prevention efforts.

What happens, however, when this strategy is applied to social problems? Here the social context and defining authority are, in fact,  $x$  in our logic sequence (if  $x$  causes  $y$ , then to eliminate  $y$ , we must eradicate  $x$ ). Take, for example, racism where whites have individual and institutional power over people of color. Here the social context is a system of beliefs and values that maintains the dominant group's status. Those who benefit from this system may be responsible for both the problem-abuse of power-and the discovery of a solution. How does the problem get defined under these circumstances?

### **Shifting Responsibility**

When addressing issues of oppression, it is of course not in the perceived self-interest of the oppressor group to implicate itself in the solution. In order for their authority to be maintained, those in power are, by design, supposed to benefit from and enforce the disparity in power between themselves and the oppressed. Substantive solutions to human oppression would involve a sharing of that power—a clear

threat to the status quo. For this reason, sharing power is seldom considered a viable solution to those wielding power. More typically the problem is redefined in order to blame the victim. In this way, whites scapegoat people of color for our violence against them. Given the social context, it does not seem unnatural to do so.

So too, when seeking solutions to men's violence against women, people often ask, sometimes with the best of intentions, "What did she do?" or "What was she wearing?" Unintentional though it may be, when we problem-solve by blaming the victim with inquiries about her behavior rather than his, it serves to deflect attention from the agency of the defining authority and camouflages the supporting role of the social context-the presumption of male superiority. With amazing ease, we look away from the violence of those in power and side with them against their victims. Those questions directing our attention and blame toward the victim and away from the perpetrator are so consistent with the social context that nothing could seem more natural.

Blaming women for men's violence against them involves a curious reversal that declares women to have the power in the relationship-that women control the choices of the perpetrator of violence. As men, we can make such assertions because the social context of male superiority gives us the power to do so. Thus when a man maintains that his partner provoked him to violence, he is asserting that she has the power to control his choices. The reality is that his violent choices function to control her.

In fact, naming the provocateur can reveal (in code) who has the real power in the relationship. The power to name is, of course, a manifestation of the power to define reality. For example, when the United States, a superpower, maintained that Grenada, a small island nation, provoked us into invading them, we were trying to shield our overwhelming power by declaring them to have control over our choices. Conversely, it is nearly incomprehensible that the United States could "provoke" Grenada to invade us (my thanks to Kathleen Carlin for this example). Similarly, men exercise their defining authority to declare that women provoke us to sexual assault and battery. It is difficult to imagine women being "provoked" by men to comparable levels of violence against us given our overwhelming social and physical advantage. The person with the "right" to ascribe fault is the one who has disproportionate power (defining authority) in the relationship.

Be this as it may, buying into the belief that women provoke the violence committed against them by men can be quite tempting. It allays our fears that men's violence is random and capricious ("My wholesome behavior will spare me."); it gives us a sense of satisfaction that we have played a role in solving a major social problem; it feels safe because to ask women to change their behavior is consistent with the social context; and it avoids conflict with those in power.

### **Function vs. Cause**

On the other hand, if we look at the function of men's violence against women rather than its socially-fabricated causes (In addition to women's behavior, unemployment, drug and alcohol use, low self-esteem are often cited), we come up with a very different definition of the problem and thus different solutions. To do so, however, requires that we accept the experience of battered women as the defining authority.

Unlike the strategy of blaming the victim, looking at the function of men's violence is terribly anxiety producing. Survivors from every imaginable setting tell us that men's violence functioned to destroy their personhood and that it served to control every aspect of their lives. So, when we talk about a man's violence as "caused" by circumstances and background, we make that violence seem as if it is not under his control. But when we talk about battering as functioning to get a certain result, we have to look at men's intentions - men's violence against women as purposeful and calculated. Examining the function of men's violence against women forces us to come to grips with the fact that men want to control women and act with intentional cruelty in order to do so. This prospect is very disturbing and so we avoid struggling with such ideas.

Historically, we have avoided this discomfort and explained men's violence against women by blaming their victims. However, that tack cannot end men's violence. Declaring women provocateurs does not alter the function of men's violence (to control women). It actually enhances it. Thus, despite the national commitment to ending violence against women, one reason we reap so few results is our widespread adherence to the myth of provocation.

### **Entitlement and Provocation**

Provocation is defined as "a response to a perceived injustice; a vexation." The sense of being provoked depends on what we feel we have coming to us-what we deserve and from whom. I am not vexed by the fact that I did not receive the Oscar for Best Actor this year but I do feel vexed by the fact that my property tax went up 68% instead of the customary 5% per year. My expectations of what I am entitled to drive my sense of injustice and my feelings of being provoked. Given a social context portraying the subservience of women to men as customary, how could gestures of independence by women not be experienced by men as provocative? In a sexist world, when women insist that power be shared, men experience it as our being victimized and as women "asking for it." Jim, a man in one of our classes, said it quite clearly. When he was asked by his partner to put the deed to their house in both their names, he told us, "She is using the fact that the court sent me to this class to test me, and you guys are helping her keep the pressure on." This attempt by Jim's partner to assert her personal agency and function as his peer was experienced by him as vexing because it threatened his superior social status and flew in the face of the current social context.

### **Paths to Justice**

So how do we get ourselves out of this socially destructive situation and end men's violence against women? I think the process will be long and difficult because it involves a fundamental change in our culture and will be experienced by men as turning our world upside down. Typically, we respond to such attempts to shift power with anger and our anger, understandably, makes women uneasy. Our charge, then, is to learn to share power with women and to get comfortable doing so. To make the answer to the "why" of men's violence against women solution-based, we must be willing to struggle with the function of that violence. A daunting task indeed, but I would like to suggest some guidelines to follow in our search for solutions.

- Deal with our discomfort as we look at men's violence against women through the function lens rather than the cause lens.
- Focus our interventions on men's accountability and women's safety.
- As men, move out of silence and collusion about our contempt and abuse of women and into a space of challenge, accountability, and change.
- Experience men's accountability not only as a caring gesture for women but also as a caring gesture for men; a call for our humanity.
- Insist that the power to define an experience of violence resides with the victim rather than the perpetrator.
- Understand that no amount of blame targeting the victim will ever stop his violence.
- Assume that the current social context distorts our image of the dynamics of battering in favor of men.
- Expect that solving social problems will, by definition, involve challenging the status quo and ourselves.

If we can consistently and courageously hold these guidelines in the forefront of our minds as we go about trying to end battering, I believe that we can make substantive strides toward our goal. Perhaps, if in fact it is what we truly desire, eventually we can create peace in our communities.