

Critical Reflections on Practice with Battered Women: Insights from Maya's Story

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ABSTRACT

Within the vast feminist-informed scholarship on violence against women, few attempts have been made to examine feminist assumptions underlying practice responses to violence against women. In this paper, through the lens of postmodernism, and with the narrative of "Maya," a young woman whose residency at a local shelter was regarded by all accounts as less than successful, we interrogate central assumptions that underlie contemporary feminist practice in battered women's shelters and conclude with thoughts on the implications of this analysis for practice with women who are or have experienced violence in their intimate relations.

RÉSUMÉ

Parmi la vaste érudition informée féministe sur la violence envers les femmes, peu de tentatives ont été faites pour étudier les hypothèses féministes sous-jacentes aux réponses pratiques contre la violence envers les femmes. Dans cet article, à travers la lentille du post-modernisme, et avec la narration de "Maya", une jeune femme, dont son séjour à un abri local, a été vu, d'après tous les rapports comme étant moins qu'un succès nous questionnons les hypothèses centrales qui sont sous-jacentes à la pratique féministe contemporaine dans les foyers pour femmes battues et nous concluons en pensant aux implications de cette analyse pour la pratique avec les femmes qui vivent ou qui ont vécu la violence dans leur relation intime.

Within the last quarter century, a vast feminist scholarship on violence against women has emerged. Within it, few efforts have been made to examine the assumptions that underlie feminist theory in practice responses to violence against women. Through the story of one woman in a shelter for battered women, we interrogate tensions between feminist theory and practice, with particular attention to notions of autonomy and independence. Our paper is divided into four sections. First, we present central elements of feminist discourse around violence against women, featuring prevailing practices in battered women's shelters. Second, we provide excerpts from in depth interviews with Maya, a young woman who resided at a battered woman's shelter. Her narrative provides an extreme example of contradictions between keeping women safe and honoring their experiences and desires. The third section offers a synthesis of key debates within feminist theorizing about women, borrowing from postmodern feminist writers. Through the lens of postmodernism, and with Maya's story in mind, we consider the implications of this analysis for feminist practice with women securing refuge in battered women's shelters.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: FEMINIST ANALYSES AND PRACTICES

Feminist interest in violence against women is by no means new. As early as 1878, British feminist activist Frances Power Cobbe took on this problem. She understood the torture and battering of women by men as being rooted in women's subordinate status in public and private spheres. Cobbe believed that gender inequality lay at the heart of male violence, and fought for a response that would ensure economic and political independence for women (Stark 1993, 654).

A century later, feminists once again rallied against women's subordination, unearthing the extent and nature of "battery." At least one in eight women in Canada is physically assaulted in a marriage or intimate relationship. Abuse is most often perpetrated by someone known, often loved and trusted, and it takes many forms: physical, emotional, financial, and sexual. Much abuse occurs in the first five years of a relationship, and women between the ages of 18-34 years are highly vulnerable (DeKeseredy and Hinch 1991; MacLeod 1987; Thorne-Finch 1992). Second wave feminists reiterated their construction of this problem: the power of men over women in a society characterized by male prerogative and domination and the subordinate status of women.

From a feminist perspective, violence against women in intimate relations refers "to the pattern of violent acts and their political framework, and a pattern of social, institutional, and interpersonal controls that usurp a woman's capacity to determine her destiny and make her vulnerable" (Stark 1993, 656). Interpersonal controls often include attacks on a woman's self-worth and self-esteem, purposeful isolation from supportive family or friends, intimidation, humiliation, and threats that may or may not include physical assaults but that are often terrifying (Shepard 1991). These tactics are intentional efforts to establish and maintain control; they can stifle, if not rob, a woman of her sense of worth and self-determination.

INTERRUPTING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Feminists have rightly identified a cycle of violence that erodes a woman's self-esteem. She often takes responsibility for her partner's actions and comes to feel unworthy (Regroupement 1990). She may see herself as a "helpless victim" and may no longer believe "in her ability to control her own destiny" (24). Understanding this cycle is necessary in order to enhance a woman's self-worth, break the isolation she has experienced and help her learn to take responsibility for herself.

Securing refuge in a shelter often represents the first interruption to the cycle of violence (Murray 1988). In the shelter, the battered woman is protected from outside influences; she is given the "physical and psychological space apart from her batterer that can allow her to reflect upon her situation and her future" (Gilman 1988, 11). "Most [shelters] identify the empowerment of women as their underlying philosophy" (Davis and Srinivasan 1994, 349). In a feminist-oriented shelter, empowerment comes about in a number of ways that are thematic through feminist discourse.

Shelter staff and volunteers often minimize the differences between themselves and residents through the notion that any woman can be victimized. Women learn that they are neither alone nor to blame. They come to understand their identity as "battered" women and their partners as responsible for the abuse, as being dangerous, controlling, manipulative and unlikely to change.

Contemporary practice in shelter settings might well recognize that women's relations with (abusive) mates are hardly one-dimensional, and that a significant number of women who stay in transition houses return to their partners. Safety plans are thus developed to help keep women safe once they leave the shelter. This is not to suggest that an emphasis on independence and autonomy is not the ultimate objective. In fact, staff and current or former residents who have achieved independence act as positive role models for all residents, demonstrating self-reliance and self-sufficiency (Murray 1988; Rodriguez 1988).

In shelters, the battered woman is touted as "the expert" in her own situation (Murray 1988). She has a voice and say in her journey from victim to survivor. The worker helps the battered woman to come to understand the cycle of violence and her place in it, and guides her to take responsibility for herself and the direction of her life (Murray 1988; Wharton 1989). Taking responsibility for herself has tended to mean taking action towards independence from her partner. Independence is regarded as desirable and attainable, given the belief that no one deserves to live under the constant threat of violence. Nearly 15 years ago, Murray and Wharton rightly pointed out the disparity between talk of self-determination and pressure to examine the cycle of violence as a route to independence. In her analysis of shelter practices, Murray found that if a woman wasn't appropriately examining her role in the cycle, she was seen to be "in denial" (1988, 81).

Wharton explored the conflicting nature of staff/resident involvement at a shelter to better understand "staff frustrations" with residents who returned "to their violent homes" (1989, 51). While residents were encouraged to make decisions about their own lives, Wharton found that the staff made decisions about the values the residents "should" adopt. For example, the staff spoke of helping battered women realize their potential for independence from their partners. "Life at the shelter proceeded as if each resident had decided not to return home. There was much work based on that assumption: applying for welfare and/or jobs, finding an apartment or house and furniture, arranging for utilities, perhaps even filing for divorce" (55). These steps to independence were not so easily subscribed to by some residents. For

example, some women in Wharton's study wanted the violence to stop, believed in their partners' promises to change, hoped for reconciliation and expressed concern about their partners' activities in their absence as well as the possible consequences of returning to them (55).

Goldner has grappled with developing an approach to battery that interweaves feminist and family systems analyses. As Goldner put it, a "narrowly feminist frame can too often shame the victim, who might secretly still love the perpetrator, no matter how accurately his abuse of power is portrayed by her supporters" (1992, 59). In feminist shelter practices, Goldner noted that anger or disdain for the man is common and an expected response is to leave him. For women whose feelings do not conform to this version, shame and confusion may result, along with feeling caught between two incompatible characterizations of the marriage. "In one version, she was the subjugated victim of an infantile, exploitative and extremely dangerous man; in the other, she was involved in a difficult and potentially dangerous relationship" (1992, 60). This observation speaks to shelter workers' fears for women's safety and how to best pursue their well-being.

With the overriding objective being women's safety, leaving an abusive mate appears to be the best course of action regardless of age, ethnicity, culture, class and the like. "Leaving" is by no means simple to achieve. On average, battered women make six attempts to leave prior to entering a shelter (Gondolf 1988, in Sullivan et al. 1992). On top of that, there exists a dearth of resources to facilitate leaving an abuser and remaining separated from him (Sullivan and Davidson 1991; Sullivan et al. 1992). Coupled with the poor health conditions of a significant number of abused women who seek refuge at a shelter (Le Regroupement 1990) and the dynamics of abusive relations, it is no wonder that abuse is often experienced as inescapable. As well, the expectation to leave assumes that the abused woman is ready, willing, and able to challenge traditional ideologies of marriage and family that have shaped and informed her sense of self and distorted her sense of self-worth, and that she can and will access fragmented and scarce resources. The contradictory expectations of leaving an abuser while wishing for his transformation and the marriage to continue are thematic in the story of

Maya. As will be seen, Maya is caught between the overriding dictums guiding feminist shelter intervention and her own vision of how to address the violence in her life.

MAYA'S STORY

Maya's story is drawn from a qualitative case study of a battered women's shelter in a large Canadian city. It entailed participant observations and 37 in-depth individual interviews between 1995 and 1999 with five permanent staff and 12 current or former residents. Interviews of approximately two hours duration covered four broad areas: conceptions and experiences of abuse, help-seeking pathways and barriers, experiences of help/services with a particular emphasis on issues of race and culture, and perceptions of self. Interviews were conducted by J. Krane and a research assistant. They were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed prior to subsequent interviews to track themes across interviews and over time. This process continued until all transcripts had been coded (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Seidman, 1991).

The initial focus of the study was on the workings of culture and race in the context of shelter practice. Purposive sampling was used to generate the sample of residents for whom issues of race and culture might be important. The resident sample included eight visible ethnracial minority women and four Caucasian women, all of whom were involved with a visible ethnracial minority partner. Their ages ranged from 19 to 49 years. Ten women were mothers. Their twenty-two children ranged in age from 18 months to 26 years. Of the 12 residents only two were employed at the time of interview.

The shelter houses up to 15 women and children. Admission criteria are non-restrictive. Services are open to adult women 18 years and over, and their children (newborns to 16 years). Over 100 women and children receive emergency shelter annually. The shelter operates from a feminist perspective as explicitly stated in its mission statement and volunteer handbook. Its services include safe refuge for up to two months, counseling, follow-up, public education and social and political action.

Maya, a 25 year old Chinese Canadian

woman, has twice sought refuge at shelters for battered women in response to consistent verbal, sexual and physical abuse by her husband. On this particular occasion, Maya and her husband were separated. He was looking after their son while she attended church. When he and the child arrived by car to pick up Maya from church, Maya saw that her husband was having difficulty with the toddler. Their son was jumping in the back seat and her husband was getting more aggravated and tense and he hit their boy. "I said 'why did you do that' and he said 'you bitch' and he hit me in the face and I knocked my face on the side of the seat and I started bleeding." When he dropped Maya and their son off at her apartment, Maya called a friend who urged her to contact the police. She was reluctant to do so: she feared that her husband would never trust her, and would believe that she didn't love him. She did not want her marriage to end in divorce. Maya also feared for her safety. "He always said if I called the police he will kill me, personally get a shotgun and shoot me." With mixed emotions, Maya called the police. Charges were laid and her husband was held overnight. Maya and her son took residency at the shelter for nearly three weeks, after which time they returned to her husband.

Shelter staff described Maya's husband as severely violent, controlling, and utterly disrespectful. Her worker imagined that someday she might read about Maya in the local newspaper with a headline stating "woman found dead in gutter." In the shelter, Maya was encouraged to talk about her experiences of abuse and consider leaving him. Expectations that she consult legal counsel, pursue welfare, establish independent living with her son and break ties with this man did not coincide with her desire to end the violence, not the marriage.

Though shelter staff challenged Maya to rethink her husband's actions as deliberate and her experience as abusive, she denied that he purposefully intended to hurt her. "It's not like he thought 'I will squeeze her neck because that will scare her.'" She held herself somewhat responsible. "I don't help him stop his anger. I think he gets angry with me because I am too persistent or stupid." Though Maya recognized his bad temper and their unpredictable relationship, she found it difficult to internalize the label of abuse: "My gosh, staff think I'm abused."

Maya tenuously began to accept her relationship as abusive. A religious woman, she looked for help from her pastor. She wished he would confront her husband and offer help. "If my husband doesn't change then I wish they [sic] could say that G-d¹ doesn't like men treating their wives this way and if you feel like it is in your best interest to divorce him then you are not condemned. I think that would be the best response." Once in shelter, Maya hoped that the staff would convince her to get out of this situation. Though she was counseled on the cycle of violence, her vulnerability and potential for change, Maya was "put off" by her worker's "aggressive" style and was ultimately alienated from her:

I felt like every time I didn't respond the same way she [worker] would, she was disappointed in me. I isolated myself from her. I felt bitter about myself because I couldn't please her. You think "oh no I have to please them" and that is what you are trying to get away from.

Sometimes I wish I had stayed longer [at the shelter], then maybe I would be more brainwashed and strong to leave him.

Maya experienced inflexibility with the intervention and contradictions in relation to her sense of self and needs. Though these experiences are not out of the ordinary, they were particularly apparent in Maya's account for she had strong religious and spiritual beliefs. Put bluntly, Maya held that having relinquished her virginity to her husband, the dissolution of her marriage would launch her into a life marked by eternal sin. Separation and divorce were unappealing to her in the context of her religious values. However, she found the pronouncement of her religious views to be uninvited. "I felt sometimes like maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe I should be at a Christian shelter [with staff that] understand that spiritual aspect. I couldn't talk about the spiritual aspects relating to my problem, but actually it [sic] had a lot to do with my problem." Maya feared that "G-d would do some horrible curse on [a woman] if she left her husband." To express this fear within the shelter was unthinkable. For one, she forecasted that shelter residents might view her as a "holy moly

[sic] or they will think I am strange and unreachable or they will just think that I am from another planet." Secondly, Maya was concerned that she was "making G-d look horrible I don't want to ruin G-d so I stop myself from talking about it. I have to pretend like I don't really care about G-d." Maya felt workers would be unsympathetic to her religious reasoning and she did not want to expose her religion to their disapproval. This nexus of factors was a "major influence" on Maya's decision to stay in her marriage. Given that "G-d doesn't approve of divorces except in adultery," Maya concluded "it was up to me to forgive and believe the person is going to repent and be a good husband."

The worker attempted to enlist Maya's G-d in making the case to Maya that she was in danger, deserved respectful treatment from her husband, and ought to consider her own well-being. This appeal to her religious concerns was not convincing to Maya:

What I was getting from the shelter was "listen honey, G-d doesn't want you to suffer." I know G-d doesn't want me to suffer, I am just not sure whether G-d thinks there is some potential in my mate and if I were to divorce him, and then he did change then maybe I would have made a mistake. I felt they did not see divorce as bad.

Maya's residency in the shelter was marked by conflict and turmoil. Nonetheless, her worker was clear about what needed to happen for Maya's empowerment. As the worker put it, "you have a problem, you leave your partner, and this is what you have to do. I say women can live alone without a man." She suggested that the message permeating practice is that "women don't have to put up with it, they don't deserve it, they don't need men to have a fulfilling life. I'm learning that it's very frustrating to convince women that they can do it on their own, without men, whatever they need."

When asked how she aids a woman to break free from an abuser, Maya's worker reflected: "I myself come across as somebody who is confident, I'm not married and I don't have a boyfriend and I don't have kids, so I have come across as somebody who can do it. I serve as a role

model!... Obviously I can't change a woman overnight but here you are, profit from this."

Consistent with the dominant feminist discourse on battery, Maya was expected to stand up for herself, get strong and leave him. These ideals of independence and autonomy all seem to speak to a particular kind of universal womanhood - single, potentially self-sufficient, without maternal responsibilities, and able to focus on getting her life together to escape the aggressor. This conception of universal womanhood has been open to significant contestation and debate.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN FEMINIST THEORY

Since the 1970s, a paradigm shift in feminism away from grand abstract theorizing about women's oppression and essentialist conceptualizations of gender towards more complex inquiries has taken place. Feminist analysts began to embrace differences between women in terms of age, race, class, sexual orientation and the like, and effectively dismantled the notion of a universal woman. Subsequently, with the influence of postmodernism, theorists continued to rethink gender relations and to explore subjectivity as socially constructed and women's identities as fragmented and even conflictual. Curiously, feminist analyses of male violence have been relatively untouched by these broader debates. While some feminist analysts have taken up issues of difference in terms of understanding male battery - as seen in the writings of women of colour and First Nations feminists (Agnew 1998; Bannerji 1999; Bograd 1999; Das Gupta 2000; Krane 1996; Krane et al. 2000; Mama 1989; Monture-Okanee 1992) - the translation of these issues in feminist shelter practice remains scant. Instead, feminist analysis of violence against women has become the new orthodoxy in the field (Featherstone and Trinder 1997). This section offers a brief overview of some of the key ideas in postmodern theorizing that provide a foundation for a critical analysis of feminist theory in the arena of violence against women.

To begin with, postmodernism and poststructuralism have encouraged the deconstruction of formerly taken-for-granted categories such as men or women, as well as

skepticism about whether there is one central imperative governing gender relations. Theorists from these schools of thought have questioned universalist notions such as "all women" or "all men," pointing out how differences in age, class, "race," religion, sexuality and the like matter considerably (Featherstone, forthcoming). The postmodern challenge to essentialist conceptualizations of "women" and "men" lead to a destabilizing of these categories; this, in turn, poses both political and theoretical problems for the feminist project of social change based on an assumed or taken-for-granted shared oppression. Feminist postmodernists began to question this essentialist view. As Razack argued, "an essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, with a clear meaning, constant through time, space and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts" (1998, 79).

In contrast to assumed essentialist categorizations, postmodern feminists argued for acknowledging differences between women and the different contexts in which their subjectivities are produced. Instead of seeing individuals as coherent, unified essences, postmodern theory suggests we are "divided, contradictory and changing" (Featherstone and Fawcett 1995, 3). Identities are seen as constituted through particular identity categories and the discourses that produce them. Thus, one's subjectivity is produced through available discourses operating in particular contexts. These are not fixed but fluid. "As the discourses through which the self is constituted are often discontinuous and inconsistent, the various subjectivities that make up identity are likely to be experienced contradictorily" (B. Davies 1994, in Healy 2000, 3). This calls into question any notion of stable continuous selves. Instead one's sense of self is precarious, contradictory and fluid (Healy, 2000).

This critique is significant for feminist practice within shelter settings wherein the various and multiple facets of a woman's identity are transformed into one overarching identity - a "battered woman." In practice, this aspect of her identity predominates over other facets of her social location and relationships. Maya, for example, experienced difficulty in accepting this narrow sense of self.

Perhaps postmodern theory allows us to reconsider the presumption of universality of the values of individual independence and autonomy. Chandler (1999) has taken issue with some feminist notions of individuality and equality in a political culture where "dominant masculinities" have been the templates with which "freedom" and "individuality" have been defined. Without questioning these ideas, she suggests that feminists are pursuing a dominant individualistic masculine subjectivity. Chandler argues that winning autonomy for women within these terms involves a repudiation of modes of relating that are based on more fluid, de-gendered boundaries. She illustrates this with reference to maternal modes of relating. Chandler contrasts the "self-in-relationship" mode with the dominant form of desirable selfhood (masculine subjectivity) which is "individualistic and rights based." The latter, Chandler contends, means the near complete eradication of the maternal, a regressive step for both men and women in her view. Chandler's analysis, while illustrated through the context of maternal modes of relating, has relevance here. Feminist postmodernist thinking highlights "the importance of interdependence and location in the construction of subjectivity" which is often suppressed by dominant (masculine) notions of subjectivity (Featherstone and Fawcett 1995, 13-14). Chandler also argues for practices of subjectivity based on an understanding of self-in-relationship and the ethics of responsibility and empathy. Such practices, she suggests, shape subjectivity and thus have implications for the reformulation of gender systems and relations.

Domestic violence discourse can also be understood as rooted in this masculine view of desirable selfhood. The vision of women becoming independent survivors may similarly repudiate other competing and complex aspects of their relationships to significant others. Maya offers us an example of a woman who is ambivalent about the project of individual independence. She has a young child, strong religious beliefs that help contribute to her commitment to her marriage, she wants the violence to stop and she wants to return to her husband. Her individual emancipation, as it is conceived in the practices of the shelter, does not appeal to her.

As well within the wife abuse literature, masculinity is often regarded as a unitary category,

unmediated by differences based on race, class, sexuality, etc. (Featherstone, forthcoming). In that context, men are seen as powerful. Postmodern feminists have disputed the conception of power as something which is possessed by men. Rather, they conceptualize power as a set of relations in which we are all inscribed, including feminists. Flax, for example, suggests that feminists abandon their dreams of innocent knowledge and their search for "some sort of truth which can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all." Instead of assuming that actions are grounded in or informed by such truth, postmodernists take the position that feminism itself is mired in knowledge/power relations and has, as a consequence, its own gaps and omissions (1993).

CONCLUSION

Where does this analysis leave us in terms of feminist practice in shelter settings? The criticisms of shelter practice are by no means new. Troubling contradictions between feminist theory of battery which emphasized male prerogative to abuse power and control in intimate relations and the more complex realities of battered women's relations with their male partners have been identified previously. Two decades later, these contradictions persist. As we saw in the story of Maya, the dominant feminist model of practice at this shelter was entirely at odds with her sense of self, social location and relationships. We suggest that feminist postmodern theory, with its emphasis on diversity, difference, and absence of grand narrative, may be helpful in the development of a more flexible feminist practice approach. Exploring alternative frameworks for practice requires relinquishing the apparent truth status assigned to hegemonic feminist discourse on the battery of women.

In the trenches of violence work, it is not easy to give up guiding beliefs. Dominant feminist discourse claims to reveal the truth about violence, its cycle, and women's needs vis-à-vis a practice response. Whatever benefits this analysis/these truths have offered to the violence field, they have limited the capacity for dialogue even with those who share the same interests in ending violence (Healy 2001).

If we accept the need for a more flexible and non-standardized approach, further

consideration must be given to the battered woman's own understanding of her identity and experience. Her account of the violence in her life and its meaning to her must become central in the helping process. This suggests accepting uncertainty regarding the best option for any particular woman and encouraging the woman's full participation in defining her circumstances and identifying solutions. We cannot assume that all women experience and interpret violence in the same way. Similarly, we would expect to uncover a range of feelings towards their male partners, including ambivalence. Sorting out these issues needs time.

Of course it is easy for us to talk. We are not on the front-line of practice, witness to the daily evidence of women's experience of violence that, not surprisingly, produces strong feeling of urgency and a desire to rescue women. A predefined feminist vision of the causes and consequences of battery and effective interventions act as a map for practice. Having such a map for action in the face of often frightening and chaotic situations may be comforting for workers but may not always be helpful to shelter residents. We imagine that letting go of certainty might be difficult. It means letting go of the fantasy of saving battered women. It also means a rethinking of characterizations of male partners as only dangerous and incorrigible. Shelter workers may need to understand and work with women's range of feelings towards their male partners, including tolerance for any ambivalence about this relationship. Letting go may well heighten workers' worries, tensions and frustrations, and has implications for what constitutes success or failure in any given case. For example achieving independence through leaving a male partner may not be the best outcome for every woman. Thus holding in abeyance any prescriptive route to battered women's autonomy and independence requires emotional support for workers. Feminist shelter workers might welcome the opportunity to interrogate their own complex and contradictory desires or feelings around these difficult practice situations.

The feminist shelter worker on the front lines may well have an adverse reaction to these sentiments given her commitment to the political aims of feminism. Second-wave feminists rallied around the issue of violence against women as incontestable evidence of the continued oppression

of women. Subjecting feminist practice to ongoing critical appraisal may seem threatening. However, many postmodern feminist theorists share this concern and struggle with the dual agenda of retaining some sense of women's shared oppression, while at the same time avoiding a universalized conception of what women want and need when addressing the violence in their lives.

ENDNOTE

1. A respectful spelling of "God."

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