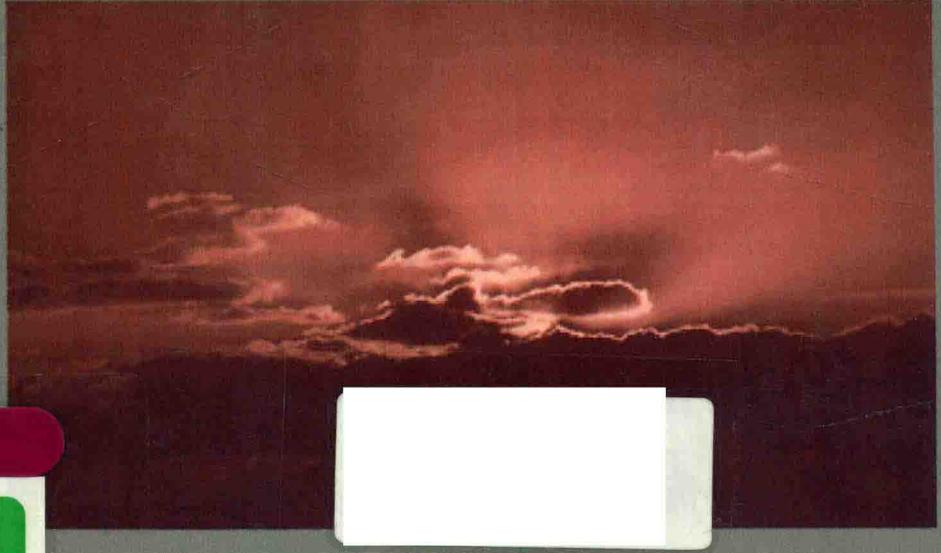
Counseling to End Violence Against Women

A Subversive Model



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Counseling to End Violence Against Women

To battered women, and especially to Nicole Brown.
May your lives contribute to a transformed world.

Preface

When I began this book, the trial of O. J. Simpson was capturing the nation's attention. In the aftermath of that trial and the decision to acquit, we are wondering as much about the societal costs of racism as about the costs of woman battering. Guilty of murder or not, reasonable doubt or jury nullification, the acquittal of O. J. Simpson confirms every battered woman's worst fears: He's going to kill me. And he's going to get away with it. And there is nothing I can do.

Like many Americans, I was initially caught up in the spectacle surrounding the celebrity of the man charged with Nicole Brown's murder, her former husband, O. J. Simpson. As a sports fan and a Californian, I had "known" The Juice since the 1960s when he played for the University of Southern California. I followed his career as a professional with the Buffalo Bills and the San Francisco 49ers. After his retirement as a player, I continued to appreciate his commentaries as a sports announcer for a national network. And I, like the millions of Americans who watch television on a daily basis, admired this strong, good-looking, personable man as he ran through airports for Hertz. Of course, all I really knew about O. J. was the persona he projected through an image on television. Within

a few days of the murder, the press began reporting the history of physical abuse that Nicole Brown had experienced over the course of her relationship with O. J. Simpson. Suddenly I "knew" Nicole Brown in a much deeper way than I had known O. J. Simpson. Prior to her murder, I was not even aware of her existence, yet I now knew Nicole Brown, because for many years I worked in daily contact with battered women. I know the fear, the pain, the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that battered women experience. I know this reality far more clearly than I could ever know a televised image.

My fascination with spectacle quickly turned to anger about society's failure to protect women. This focus has not only renewed my conviction that traditional psychology is inadequate in its response to battered women but has also raised questions for me again about some of the hallmarks of feminist psychology, in particular the notion of individual empowerment. I began to think about the ways in which Nicole Brown's life and death might be used as a catalyst to remold our conceptual tools for helping battered women. So I decided to write this book in which I offer a conceptual tool, a model for counseling battered women. I have shared the immediate context that prompted me to write this book; but as a feminist, I believe that any theory is developed by a person, a subject, within a social and historical context that has political implications. So let me begin by providing my personal context and history in more detail.

Much of my professional life has been devoted to working toward a society that respects and values women. For as long as I can remember, I have positioned myself as an advocate for social change. Long before I could begin to articulate just what I thought needed to change or how to go about it, I saw myself as opposed to a status quo that I equated with mediocrity. I knew that a much better world could be achieved. Perhaps this urge for change was merely adolescent idealism, restlessness, and oppositionality wrought by the circumstances of the 1960s. Certainly, my impulse to work for change emerged long before I encountered a feminist analysis that crystallized my unformulated ideas about political power and oppression. Nonetheless, I entered graduate school in 1978 with the explicit idea that the best way to work for social change was to work on changing individuals. It was my view that respecting, validating, and valuing individuals through the counseling relationship would cause these individuals to emerge with a changed consciousness about the world. Cumulatively, the changed consciousness of individuals would lead to the

creation of a more just and equitable society. However, since 1978 I have gradually come to view this notion differently.

Many years and complex experiences intervened between the start of my master's degree program and the completion of my doctoral degree in counseling psychology. These experiences led me to identify myself as a radical feminist, a social activist, and a feminist psychologist, working toward fundamental changes in the way we structure our personal lives and our political and economic arrangements. These experiences also caused me to question my earlier assumption that focusing exclusively on individual changes in consciousness was enough to eventually change society. I began to think of myself as an activist connected to a social movement for women's liberation. These self-concepts have, over the past 20 years or so, become important elements of my identity as a woman and a professional.

From 1978 to 1990, I participated in the work of a community-based women's center in Pennsylvania that provides counseling and other services to battered women and sexual assault victims. I began as a hotline volunteer, responding to crisis calls, and later offered group and individual counseling to victims. When state and federal funding became available for domestic violence and sexual assault programs, I became a board member of this center and helped articulate its feminist philosophy and goals. In 1984, I was hired as executive director of the center. From this position I continued to work directly with victims but also trained and supervised the counseling and volunteer staff. I worked with the center's board of directors and staff to build on and find innovative ways to implement our philosophy while providing an increasingly utilized service for victims.

As the director of a rape and domestic violence program, part of my role was to serve as a board member for each of two state coalitions—the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV) and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR). These coalitions serve as the funding conduits, information clearinghouses, monitors, and support systems for community rape and domestic violence programs across the state. In that role, I had the opportunity to be involved in many aspects of social policy planning and development. It was also at this level of participation that I first developed an affective sense of connection to a social movement—a sense of being part of something larger, joined with other women in a common effort to end violence against women.

Two experiences in particular stand out for me. These experiences solidified my sense of participation in a social movement and my commitment to the values and goals of that movement. As a board member of PCADV, I served on a committee whose task it was to develop a program model for battered women's programs. Once we had clarified that it was our mission to develop an ideal model to which programs might aspire, rather than a blueprint from which mandated standards would be developed, we were free to develop recommendations based in our strong ideological commitment, without regard to more conservative community, economic, or political constraints. On an ideological level, I felt closely aligned with the women on that committee who developed the program model, and I attempted to implement the model, as much as possible, in the program I directed.

A second experience of importance to me occurred in 1988. I attended the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) conference in Seattle. Many events at that conference stand out for me as building on my commitment to and participation in a battered women's movement, but one had particular relevance for me because it stimulated some questions that later became the basis for my dissertation thesis. I attended a feminist research group that met several times during the week of the conference. The goal of the group was to develop a research agenda for the battered women's movement. The idea was that rather than having our issues studied by academicians outside the movement, we would define and research those issues. In that way we could ensure that the research would be accountable to battered women. This notion was exciting but also created some dissonance for me because of the ways the group dichotomized academicians and participants in the movement. I saw myself as one who sought ways to combine my academic training with my activist commitments. At the time, I was able to set aside this dissonance and focus on study topics that were brainstormed within the group. One of the subjects identified included questions about what we (battered women's programs) were doing in counseling—what made it work and why was it good? These questions helped provide the spark for my dissertation research, in which I developed a descriptive model of the ways in which counselors working in rape and domestic violence programs conceptualized their counseling efforts, as well as the ideology of the social movement in which they worked (Whalen, 1992).

So, in the 15 years since I obtained my master's degree in clinical psychology, my encounters with radical feminist movements and with feminist political and psychological theory have deepened my commitment to social change. In recent years, I have moved from my position as an active participant in the battered women's movement to practice in a site of academic learning. I no longer direct a community-based women's center that works with battered women and survivors of sexual violence. Now I teach and theorize in women's studies and direct a university-based women's center, where my goal is to ensure that the feminist theories of women's studies remain connected to the practice of women's center services and programs. In this environment I still encounter, with a fair amount of regularity, women who are victims of male violence. And I work with them within the framework of the counseling model I will articulate in this book, remaining attentive to the ways my theories and ideology inform my counseling practice. I am better able to conceptualize and explicate the ways in which society permeates the individual and can be acted upon by the individual. I carry within me a powerful sense of community, developed through my participation in the anti-rape and battered women's movements specifically, and feminism more generally. And I continue to believe that social change is both imperative and possible. I remain convinced that one particularly powerful avenue for igniting the fire of social change ideals is the counseling relationship, particularly when the problems being explored through counseling are those that appear to be rooted in our social and political systems. This book is an outgrowth of these ideals and convictions.

There is, however, more that the reader should know about the context out of which my ideas developed about counseling as an activity aimed at subverting the status quo. In 1991, when I completed my dissertation research and described the conceptual models that emerged from the interviews I conducted, I discovered that the counseling models held by counselors working in battered women's and anti-rape programs were primarily psychological (i.e., focused on individual remediation) and apolitical. These models reminded me of the understandings I had held when I entered graduate school; however, because my views of counseling had changed radically through my experience in the battered women's movement, I had assumed the counselors who worked in movement programs also would have ideas about counseling as a political endeavor aimed at

social change. I was surprised that there was a discrepancy between my findings and what I expected to discover, for they stood in stark contrast to the ideology of the battered women's movement.

As a participant in that movement, and a member of both PCADV and NCADV, I was initially reluctant to disseminate the findings of my dissertation research. My reluctance was based in part on what I encountered at the 1988 conference in Seattle—the tendency within NCADV to be wary of "professionalist" approaches to helping battered women. NCADV has historically attacked professionalism as antithetical to feminist responses to battered women. For NCADV, professionalism implies training in patriarchal institutions of academia, which cuts counselors off from a feminist consciousness about the societal roots of woman battering. Although I believed that I could merge my professional training and my activism, now that I was nearing the completion of my Ph.D., I could be defined as a professional. I feared my findings might be quickly dismissed, despite my years of work in the battered women's movement. Moreover, because my research revealed a disjunction between the ideology of the battered women's movement and the practice of counseling within domestic violence programs, I was also concerned that the counselors who were part of my study might be discredited.

My concerns about publishing my research went beyond my personal worry about being dismissed as a professional, and even beyond my consideration of the potential effects on my colleagues who participated in the study. I initially felt that my findings were, in a sense, a betrayal of NCADV and the battered women's movement. That is, I was concerned that the findings might be used as part of a conservative attack on the movement, and I wanted in no way to contribute to the backlash that feminist movements for social change are experiencing. But my response to the death of Nicole Brown has changed my attitudes. I have come to realize that the failure to disseminate my findings constitutes a far greater betrayal—a betrayal of battered women as a group.

And so it is within this context that I have taken the disappointment from my case study research, the horror and tragedy of Nicole Brown's abuse and murder, and my feminist commitments to radical social change and have developed a model for subversive counseling. Although I focus here on the concerns and needs of battered women, I believe the model can be extended to work with any persons whose presenting issues are the result of problems that are rooted in society. The model is grounded in the

heritage of those theorists who offer a more holistic conceptualization of the practice of counseling and the practice of social change (Agel, 1971; Brown, 1994; Hutchinson & Sandler, 1975; Prilleltensky, 1994). It is within this tradition that I formulate and offer a radical feminist model for counseling to end violence against women.

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of many years of conceptual development, political experience, and psychological counseling practice. The specifics are detailed in the introduction to provide a basis for understanding the context out of which this subversive model of counseling arose. Here, I want to briefly provide formal acknowledgment of the people who have, knowingly or unknowingly, assisted me in this enterprise.

First, a word about the title of this book. I have long been convinced that counseling should promote social change, social justice, and a transformed world. Thus, *Counseling to End Violence Against Women* provides a counseling model that seeks to challenge and subvert, from a feminist perspective, the status quo. In arriving at an understanding that counseling could indeed serve subversive goals, I am indebted to the following people.

I acknowledge the social movement organized for and by battered women, and I am thankful for the experience I gained by participating in the work of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. A special acknowledgment is due the counselors who participated in my doctoral research project.

Berenice Fisher introduced me to alternative approaches to building psychological theory and encouraged me in my pursuit of women's studies, feminist criticism, and feminist activism. Mary Sue Richardson served as mentor and adviser during my doctoral study at New York University and supported my nontraditional (for psychology) research. Bernard Katz, professor, adviser, and longtime proponent of community action counseling, used the phrase *counseling as a subversive activity* in an earlier paper. Though I had arrived independently at the title for my dissertation, *Counseling as a Subversive Activity,* discovering that he and others had also seen the subversive potential of counseling provided a sense of validation for my work.

I have learned from the lives and struggles of three sisters who are my immediate forebears—my mother, Marion Geserich Townsend; my aunt, Jane Taylor; and my aunt, Ruth Reid—as well as their mother and my grandmother, Adelaide Geserich. My daughters, Erin and Kelly, also have taught me a great deal—about them and about myself. Each has experiences of resistance and tolerance, to patriarchal oppression as well as to their mother's strongly stated opinions.

My life partner, Joe Ashcroft, prodded me to write this book now. The time, he insisted, was right, and in the conversation about woman battering, my ideas were needed. I was convinced by his urging to begin. And now, thanks to his willingness to read and reread, to edit and re-edit, to continue to ask me what in the world I mean by *X,* it is done.

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