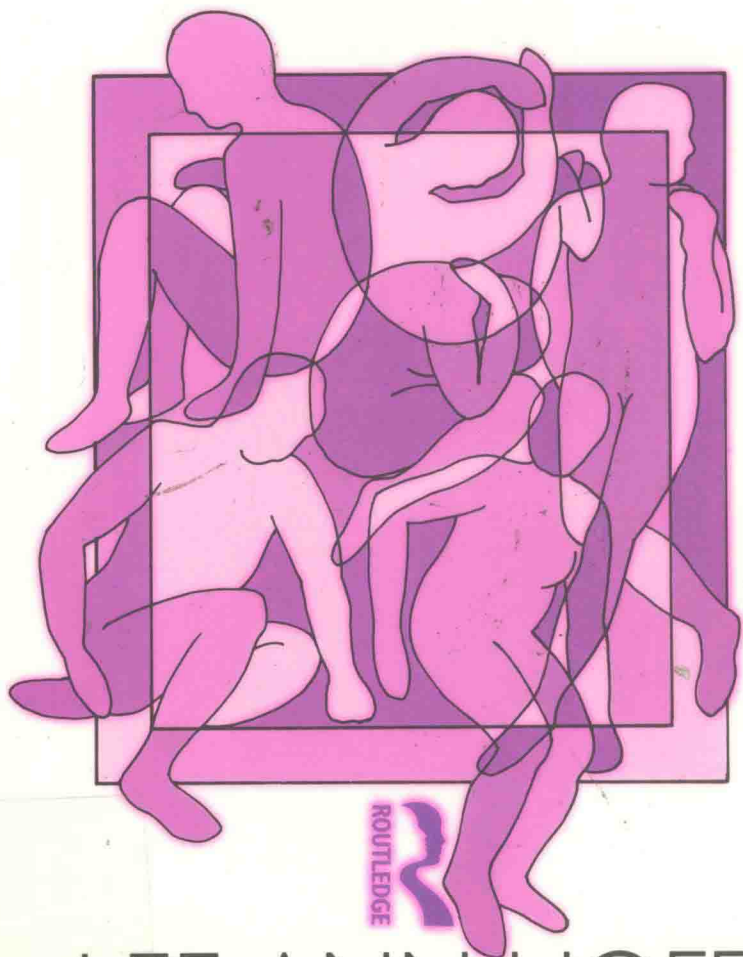


BATTERED WOMEN

AS SURVIVORS



ROUTLEDGE

LEE ANN HOFF

Battered women as survivors

Lee Ann Hoff



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Preface

When I was deeply involved in the work this book describes, a colleague asked if I was embarrassed to be researching such a popular topic. The question carried the implicit stigma of problem-oriented research, in contrast to more strictly 'theoretical' issues. Although social scientists might be interested in this query for what it suggests about progress in social theory building, most battered women and their advocates would interpret it as belittling their concerns, or dismiss it as irrelevant to the issue of women's safety and equality.

This book documents the results of my collaborative study with battered women focusing particularly on their interaction with their mates and social network members. From the perspective of their life-histories, it reveals why the women stayed and eventually left their violent mates; what family members, friends, and professionals did or did not do for them and why; and what happened once they left the violent relationship and a shelter.

What emerges from these women's accounts is a view of them as survivors who struggled courageously with little network support to extract themselves and their children from the tragic results of their victimization. During the time spent with these women and their families, I observed their transformation from victims to survivors. And, because of their unique role in helping me complete the research, I concluded that they were much more than 'informants' or study participants; the women and their shelter advocates were research collaborators who made an unparalleled contribution to understanding their lives and the society that permitted their victimization. The women's experiences and their collaboration in the research process provided a dramatic perspective for the tension between academics and activists concerned with battered women. This research reveals why activists have been so suspicious of academics,

but also demonstrates that such divisions between groups working on a common problem need not continue.

The book's four parts correspond to the phases in the women's life histories. The first part situates the study with background issues and the research approach, and details the periods before and during the violent episodes the women experienced, including the process of leaving violent relationships and moving from victim to survivor roles. Part II includes analysis of the social interaction and values of both the battered women and their social network members regarding women, marriage, the family, and violence.

Part III addresses the women's experience after leaving a violent mate. For most of the women, this period consisted of living in a shelter for several weeks. The problems of battered women and their children, including poverty and homelessness, are examined, as are the effects of violence against women beyond the crisis aspects of battering. Contemporary rites of passage to a violence-free life and to parenting roles are also examined.

Part IV summarizes the research results and addresses theoretical and methodological, as well as public policy and human service practice implications of the study. The Epilogue reveals the women's lives through follow-up interviews five years later. An Appendix elaborates on theoretical and methodological facets of the study introduced in Chapter 1. Unlike most research reports, this material is placed at the end instead of the beginning, since it is of greatest interest to social scientists, whereas the book as a whole is intended for both professionals and lay-persons – academics, clinicians, and programme administrators, social activists, and any woman or man concerned about violence.

As I publicly thank all who helped with this work, I am reminded again of a pivotal message of this research: women need a chance to speak, to be heard, and to be acknowledged in the public domain. Yet, precisely because battering has been treated as a taboo topic, the chief collaborators in this study remain subject to stigmatization; thus, ironically, I cannot name them in this public statement. Though these women, their families, and other network members have chosen to remain anonymous, without them this work would never have been born.

Since the victims of violence cannot be publicly named, I acknowledge other collaborators only generally as well. These include the women of Woman House, whose dedicated work provides shelter and other life essentials to battered women and their children in spite of limited public support. Various academic colleagues made valuable contributions by their thoughtful response to my critique of the traditional knowledge system and approaches to researching value-

Preface

laden topics. In this, they represent the truest understanding of academics' role in fostering the discovery of new knowledge about old problems.

Finally, my personal network of family and friends supported me in social, emotional, and material ways that represent the ideal of what social networks are all about. Since no public or private grant money was obtained to support this work, I am especially grateful to friends and colleagues who, because they believed in the study's importance, sustained me in numerous ways while I completed it with personal resources. Special thanks also go to those who read this lengthy manuscript and provided valuable feedback at various stages of its production. Each of you know who you are and how much you have helped. I thank you. In spite of all this help, I am, of course, responsible for any limitations of this work.

Lee Ann Hoff
January 1990

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Part I

Battered women: private struggles against a public problem

Reconciling the personal and political through collaborative research

Introduction

'Why do battered women stay?' has become the most frequently asked question in both academic and everyday circles, now that the topic of violence against women has emerged from hundreds of years of silence. Such silence signalled the belief that battering was a private matter between partners, a manifestation of the dichotomy between personal privacy and public interest that has dominated western thought regarding the family and sexual relations. Traditionally, man was in charge at home and abroad, while woman was to fulfil her 'natural' destiny as reproducer and nurturer of children and men. One consequence of this social arrangement is that women victimized by their mates have had to assume personal responsibility for a domestic problem that in reality extends well beyond the family, embracing all of society's institutions and values.

Traditional ideology supports oppressive social arrangements based on sex, race, and class. From such an ideology flows logically the tendency to blame a battered woman for her victimization by asking why *she* does not leave. Furthermore, the dominant ideology creates a climate that represses the probability of asking more appropriate questions about violence against women: 'Why are men violent? Why are women so easily victimized? Why are violent men *allowed* to stay?' And, after intensive socialization of women to think of their 'proper' place as the home, 'Why should they, the victims – rather than their assailants – be expected to leave?'

In such a climate millions of victimized women have learned survival tactics, largely through their personal effort and close ties with other women. Many others, though, continue to lose their lives or homes because of their husbands' or lovers' violence, partly because many still view this public issue as a 'private' spousal matter. For most women, violence or its threat continues to be a central issue of

physical, psychological, and social survival.

Academics and human service professionals have recently taken an interest in the topic of wife abuse. But professionals began to address the issue only when grassroots activists – many of them former battered women – had brought it to public attention, and demonstrated that wife abuse was one result of unequal power relations between women and men, rather than the assumed psychopathology of women who seek their own victimization.

Currently, diverse attitudes and agendas regarding wife abuse are revealed when battering is publicly discussed. Activists are primarily concerned with protecting women and changing the political and social conditions that contribute to wife abuse. Human service professionals, in contrast, ordinarily assume an apolitical posture when offering assistance to abused women. They may diagnose the problem in psychiatric terms, thereby avoiding the social ramifications of a woman's plight. Academics' major goal is to produce new knowledge through research, implying that the activists' political goals contradict the 'objective' pursuit of knowledge.

When examining the lives and interactions of particular women with their violent mates and social network members, the dichotomies and conflicts between activists, human service professionals, and academics become visible. This book reports on a field study with women who experienced violence from their mates, left them, and rebuilt their lives free of violence – usually with little formal assistance.

The central concern of this research is to trace the influence of values and social support on battered women, as expressed through a woman's social network. Several related issues, however, influenced the development and shape of this study.

Background issues

Researchers do not usually make contextual concerns explicit. But in this study several contextual issues were pivotal both to the problem of access and to the secondary effects of the research process described by the women in this study. These issues influenced the study's theoretical underpinnings, the collaborative multi-methods I chose, and the outcomes of the research.

Mainstream and feminist research

The first contextual question involved the polarization between mainstream and feminist researchers on the topic of violence against women. Broadly, mainstream researchers follow the positivist tradition in social science. They emphasize causal explanations of

violence, and favour, but do not limit their analysis to, hypothesis testing through sophisticated quantitative techniques. Some traditional social scientists may express feminist sympathies, but nevertheless attempt to explain social behaviour 'objectively', without critiquing patriarchy (Yllo and Straus 1981). Feminist¹ researchers, on the other hand, are closer to the interpretive tradition and conflict theory. They focus on the socially constructed political, economic, and cultural *context* in which they believe violence against women flourishes with implicit social approval, and emphasize qualitative methods such as interactional, historical, and political analyses (e.g. Rapp 1978; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Stark, Flitcraft, and Frazier 1979; Elshtain 1981; Oakley 1981a; Smith 1987; Yllo and Bograd 1988).

Even in academic circles that are not polarized along feminist lines, theorists such as Giddens (1979: 234) note the 'disarray' that characterizes contemporary social theory. Social analysis can no longer be conducted according to a single grand theory such as structural-functionalism or general systems theory (Bernstein 1978; Giddens 1979; Berger and Kellner 1981; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). The theoretical proliferation is evident in philosophical debates about the nature of social explanation, social action, and actors. Explanations of violence and victimization must be considered in the context of these debates (Winch 1958; Giddens 1979).

The nature of social explanation

The legacy of positivist social science has serious ramifications for constructing theories and researching violence. It is commonplace, for example, to look for 'causes' of domestic violence by asking questions such as: 'Why do some men beat their wives?' or, 'Why do battered women stay?' Lay and professional opinion often imply that drinking, unemployment, stress, or mental illness are the motivating 'causes' of domestic violence.² Yet, even if alcoholism, stress, mental illness, etc., are factors contributing to violence, to cite them as 'causes' is reductionist. It is therefore important to specify the sense in which 'cause' is being used.

One assumption in this research is that a cause-and-effect interpretation, paradigmatic of the natural sciences, is inadequate to explain a human, context-laden phenomenon such as violence. Therefore, in response to the question: 'Why do battered women stay?' this study looked for *reasons* that might clarify the *meaning* of some women's behaviour, rather than *causes* that *determine* it. Such an approach assumes that social science is different, not only in *degree* but in *kind*, from the natural sciences (Winch 1958).

The nature of social action and actors

Assumptions about the nature of social action and actors flow from assumptions about the nature of social explanation. If social phenomena cannot satisfactorily be explained in the causal framework of the natural sciences, then the nature of social action and human actors similarly defy causal explanations. Thus, a person who is physically attacked is not merely a helpless victim, and the attacker is not merely an irresponsible savage. Rather, human beings, who by nature are rational, capable, and governed by cultural rules, are engaging in social action whose sum is much more complex than individual behaviours. They are therefore responsible for their actions in various situational contexts, although consciousness may be clouded and responsibility mitigated by certain social, cultural, and/or personal factors, e.g. insanity or self-defence.

Theory and practice

A second issue which influenced this research concerns the gap between theoreticians and practitioners regarding violence against women. On the one hand, there are women scholars in various academic disciplines struggling to develop research-based feminist theory to answer questions and inform practice around women's issues (e.g. Chodorow 1978; Oakley 1981a; Wardell, Gillespie, and Leffler 1981; Gilligan 1982). On the other hand, feminist activists are concerned primarily with the political process and social-structural change to improve women's overall status and reduce their personal pain. Among these activists are women who establish and operate refuges for battered women (e.g. Warrior 1978; Schechter 1982).

Some activist women who are suspicious of academics, researchers, and professionals clearly illustrate the distance between these two groups. They are often indifferent about whether scholars are feminist, traditional, or anti-feminist, and some oppose research because they feel it unfairly 'uses' women, regardless of who is conducting it. This significant gap between academics and activists is dramatized by what I have called the 'problem of access' in studying violence in a naturalistic setting. The fundamental issue is whether researchers exploit disadvantaged or powerless groups, and how research methods may result in such exploitation.

As I considered this problem, three things became clear. First, I was caught in the middle of an historical struggle between theorists and practitioners over an issue of women's rights and how to interpret and correct violence against them, and related concerns. Second, what women in the practice field needed was not more theoretical

rhetoric, but rather a *demonstration* of how research might be carried out so that the results would be useful without exploiting those being researched. Third, if I eventually succeeded in completing this study, it would probably yield new insights into the relationship between theory and practice and into methods of researching sensitive political issues. (See Appendix for further discussion of the access problem.)

Social network concepts and intervention

The third issue affecting this research was the disjunction between social network concepts and how they were applied to troubled people and members of their social networks. A vast body of social science and clinical research³ underscores the need for support from natural and formal network members. Yet human service practitioners usually focus on the distressed *individual* rather than the group of which the troubled person is a member. Such an emphasis reflects the pervasive influence of the medical model in health and human service practice, which stresses the individual rather than social aspects of problems (Hoff 1989: Chapters 2 and 5).

This dominant individualized approach to clinical practice in western cultures is particularly significant for victims of violence, since the source of their victimization is predominantly family members, intimates, and other network members. Thus, while one's social network may be the most reliable source of support and aid during crisis, those network members are also the source of one's greatest risk of assault from cradle to grave (FBI 1982). The failure of human service practitioners to incorporate these social factors into clinical practice has contributed to the process of 'blaming the victim' (Ryan 1971).⁴

Interrelationship between person, problem, theory, and method

The fourth issue consisted of the relationship between the person of the researcher, the problem, the theory guiding the research, and methods of study. Basically, the topic of violence and theories about it, together with my critical perspective, led me to conclude that research methods, especially those claiming to be objective and value-free, may not only be part of the problem, but raise ethical questions as well. These interrelated factors also influenced my multiple-methods approach to the topic. Here I have extended Reinharz' (1979) notion of the relationship between the person, the problem, and the method. Reinharz and others (e.g. Watson-Franke 1980; Wallston 1981; Gergen 1982) urge researchers to examine the

extent to which their values influence their choice of research topics and methods.

The person

As the person doing this research, I was prepared as a psychiatric nurse clinician with a crisis speciality, as well as a social scientist. The feminist perspective informing my clinical and academic work, moreover, produced a deep concern about the gaps between feminist theory and practice, and between mainstream and feminist research. To successfully bridge some of these gaps required close attention to defining the topic and choosing appropriate research methods.

The topic

Historically, researchers' approaches to the topic of violence have varied from 'selective inattention' (Dexter 1958; Gelles 1974), to medicalized definitions, to a political interpretation of the problem (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Stark, Flitcraft, and Frazier 1979; Schechter 1982: 215). My selection of this topic clearly arose from my activist concern for abused women. Accordingly, my theoretical approach to it accords with the feminist definition of the problem; that is, one of power relations between women and men. Implied, however, within this power disparity is the notion that women are not violent and that they are innocent victims and amoral beings. This view contrasts with research that suggests that men and women are equally violent (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980).

Such 'evidence' seems to weaken the view of women as 'innocent victims'. But the issue is more complex than it appears. The so-called 'equality' between male and female violence in these data refers to 'incidence' of violent acts without specifying the *context* of the violence or the degree of resultant injury. These researchers add that in most instances women's violence is usually in self-defence; physical injury rarely results; women are in a weaker, more vulnerable position; and therefore first priority should be given to aiding beaten wives (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980: 43-4).⁵

These contextual circumstances also suggest that, even though there is real power disparity between women and men (which calls for social action), women are not merely passive victims. And indeed, this research and other work (e.g. Dobash and Dobash 1979) reveals that, in spite of brutalization and lack of social support, battered women are long-term survivors in violent marriages, and many do eventually leave such relationships. Nevertheless, the customary tendency to report decontextualized statistical data is central to the antagonistic relationship between academics and activists that was uncovered in this study.