

Serving Victims of Abuse: Inner-Workings of a Family Violence Crisis Shelter

Honors Thesis by **Ashley Dwyer**

Abstract

I used my time as an intern in a women's crisis shelter to research family violence and observe its victims. Using the sociological method of participant research, I was able to observe the dynamics of this group of women and study their interactions with shelter workers, as well as each other. Because family violence has the ability to affect so many aspects of a victim's life, the interactions and norms that take place in the shelter environment are significant and important for sociologists to study. Through informal interviews with the shelter staff and continuous observation, this qualitative research explores the norms and interactions that enable the shelter to function and effectively help its clients. The process of leaving an abusive situation or recovering from a violent incident takes time, determination, and support. The shelter's ultimate goal is for survivors of abuse to live independently and take control of their own lives. The shelter serves as a safe place where women and their children can begin the healing process through support and empowerment. The services provided by this family violence crisis shelter, and similar organizations across the country, are socially necessary and invaluable to the communities they serve.

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Introduction

Disclaimer

Due to the confidentiality policies in place at the Family Violence Crisis Shelter under study, the names of clients, shelter staff, and the local women's organization that supported this study, were not mentioned in the resulting research. This measure was taken to ensure the safety of all those involved with the shelter, and to protect the identities of the women it houses and employs. For these reasons, individuals in this study were referred to by their position titles.

Personal Experience

The semester prior to my college graduation was spent working a total of 300 hours (about 20 hours per week) at a local Family Violence Crisis Shelter, which was part of a larger organization that dealt with issues regarding women. I chose the shelter as the site for an internship that would serve as a capstone course and ultimate learning experience to complete my bachelor's degree in Applied Sociology. Several of my previous sociology courses focused on the relationship between individuals and society

and the interactions that people have with each other. One class with the title of “Family Problems,” related the ways in which major societal issues impacted the family as an institution. The perception that the family functioned as the original context in which individuals learn how to interact with others, sparked my interest in family issues and counseling.

In addition to meeting a requirement for my major, the purpose of my internship was to observe and explore counseling as a possible career path. Working with the shelter’s Resident Counselor gave me the opportunity to observe the counseling process as well as some of its benefits. Due to confidentiality policies, I was not able to observe individual counseling sessions. However, because the shelter clients were a somewhat captive group, I was able to watch some of them go through a process in which they started to heal by becoming stronger, and more confident in their decisions. This practical work experience also taught me the different types of counseling careers I could choose to pursue.

Spending four months in the shelter environment allowed me to observe an elusive and often voiceless population of women. Shelter clients make up only a small percentage of battered women. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) I was only able to observe those who sought the help of the shelter and its counseling services. Furthermore, as an intern, my contact was somewhat limited, but I was able to catch a glimpse of the effects that violence and battering had on shelter clients, and the ways in which they chose to handle the personal issues that came with separating from an abusive partner or

family member. My experiences working in the shelter were significant to my education and greatly effected my personal perception of family violence as a major societal issue.

Training

Initially, I knew very little about the women's center and the services they provided, just that they helped women in crisis and offered counseling programs. Luckily, there was an educational course whose purpose was to ease volunteers into working with victims of abuse. In order to volunteer, or otherwise work with any program in the women's center, I was required to complete thirty hours of Advocate Training. **Advocacy** is a form of support for any population or issue and includes being educated about the topic and empathetic towards the people you intend to help. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) The women's center provided the materials and different speakers, who were mostly employees of a larger organization, to educate the prospective volunteers on the services they provided to victims of several types of abuse.

This training provided the context for the issues surrounding the experience, survival, and nature of crimes like sexual assault, family violence, and child sexual abuse. We learned that people commit violent crimes in order to gain power and control over their victims. Even sex crimes such as assault and abuse are not based on sexual desire or attraction, but power and control. From this framework, I, along with fifteen other volunteers, was able to view things from a victim's perspective. In fact, one role playing exercise called "In Her Shoes" put volunteers through different possible scenarios in which we had to make decisions of how to escape abuse and then attempt to live

independently. Of course, the scenarios were complicated further by an intentional lack of resources and often no money, no job, or no permanent place to stay. Through this, and similar activities, advocacy training prepared us to work with clients in crisis. Training mainly gave us background information on the issues victims faced, as well as services available to help them.

Working

Because I wanted to observe and participate in the counseling process, I took advantage of the time that I was able to learn from my site supervisor, the shelter's Resident Counselor. My supervisor invited me to observe meetings with clients that dealt with less private issues, such as legal options or discussions of independent living and safety. Watching the Resident Counselor interact with clients taught me that counseling, especially in this setting, involved much more than addressing emotional issues. I learned how versatile the role of counselor could be, mainly because this particular population of clients had a wide spectrum of issues and needs to be discussed.

In addition to working with the Resident Counselor, I also helped the other shelter employees with daily tasks around the building. Most days I helped pick up or sort through donations from businesses or individuals in the community. Donation control and organization is a major part of daily function in the shelter. Staff members try to give as much to clients as possible, then store the extra for use in the future. I also did clerical work on a regular basis which involved filing, typing, and up-dating older informational materials for the shelter's continued use.

After training and more hands-on experience, I was certified to handle confidential information and interact directly with clients in the shelter. Clients eventually recognized me as trustworthy because of how much time I spent working in the office area and helping in the living quarters of the shelter. They came to me with simple questions when the other shelter workers were busy or could not be found.

Every day was a different experience at the shelter because I never knew what was going to happen, or what needed to be done. Would I have to answer a crisis call or prepare a room for an incoming client? This unpredictable nature made the shelter a very interesting place to work and kept me busy.

Soon after I completed my advocate training and began my work inside the shelter, I became more and more interested in the issues that the clients needed the most assistance with, such as housing, employment, childcare, and counseling. Part of my internship course required that I complete a sociological project for my site organization, so I decided to research these topics and turn the project into an Honors Thesis. As part of the project I wanted to interview the shelter staff to find common themes they have observed in clients over their collective years of experience.

Purpose

My intension with this research is to explore the inner-workings of this particular local shelter and to highlight its importance as a social necessity. In addition, this project describes common interactions that occur inside the shelter, something that everyday citizens would not be able to observe or understand without having a similar experience

or an affiliation with the shelter itself. The research included here also answers some questions about how individual circumstances influence shelter clients' decisions to use or not use the services available to them. It also illustrates some common behavior patterns, or "norms" that shelter employees have noticed over several years of working with victims of family violence.

I feel that by informing the general public about the social significance of the services provided to battered women, communities may be more willing to support the victims and the centers that serve them. Direct service organizations, such as the one studied here, are essential to the safety and care of victims of abuse. Family Violence is an important social issue that every community should address.

Previous Research

Sociological Framework

Sociologically, this research project was designed with the interactionist perspective in mind. The interactionist perspective is a theoretical framework in sociology that focuses attention on how individuals interact with each other and with social systems. Specifically, this perspective works on the assumption that individual interactions shape our experiences and have significant meaning in the larger scope of society. (Johnson 2000)

Individuals typically learn how to interact with others at a young age from their family surroundings. Interactions with family members are an individual's first form of socialization, making family an important part of the human experience. Family, as an institution, serves several cultural purposes such as raising the young and teaching them the norms and folkways of society. Families are often the source of individual morals and values as well. Another function of the family is to provide support and safety for all of its members. (Johnson 2000)

Despite their social purpose, individual families vary in structure, circumstance, and levels of responsibility, leaving room for diverse ways of life. However, the variance in levels of family responsibility also leaves room for negligence and abuse. (Johnson 2000) The simple existence of battered women and abused children are proof that families do not always function according to the accepted norms of society. Typically, the clients that the shelter protects come from dangerous environments and unhealthy or

dysfunctional family relationships. Sometimes the negative influence of unhealthy relationships replaces norms and values with self-doubt and shame. For that reason, it is usually beneficial for battered women to leave abusive situations and live independent of their abuser.

In the case of battered women, the interactionist perspective was used to argue that interactions that take place within a family violence crisis shelter are important to the people involved, whether they are victims or members of the shelter staff. My research has found that most of these interactions have the potential to benefit victims of abuse by improving their living situation, increasing their level of independence, and giving them the tools to heal emotionally from traumatizing events.

Terminology

This section provides basic information about family violence and abuse topics in order to inform readers of the scope of these issues. Because family violence has so many different aspects, the definitions stated here are based on previous research and the most common types of abuse experienced by shelter residents. Relating to these definitions may help readers partially understand the victim's perspective and thought process when dealing with issues of safety, emotions, and the prospect of independence.

Many preconceived notions about "abuse" reason that only physical violence is considered abuse and is the only topic of concern for victims. However, abuse has many names and dynamics that non-victims may never realize until they are put in an abusive

situation. It is also important to point out that victims themselves do not always recognize the things they are going through until they seek help and try to identify their problems.

Abuse is a blanket term used to include several types of coercive, manipulative, or controlling behaviors which have damaging effects on the victim. Abuse is behavior by one person that prevents another person from being in control of themselves. Often victims are threatened, forced to behave in certain ways, physically harmed, and controlled by fear. Different types of abuse include verbal, emotional, psychological, economical, and physical. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.)

Examples of abusive behavior can range from yelling and name-calling to preventing a person from eating, sleeping or having any outside contact. Sometimes victims may be isolated from their family and friends for very long periods of time. Furthermore, if they are not allowed to work, victims may have no where to turn when the abusive situation escalates. They also have potentially no resources with which to leave without an independent income. Controlling a person's actions, behaviors, and thoughts is very destructive, especially in cases where the victim loses all sense of self or identity due to the abuse they have experienced.

Violence is a learned behavior that is based on power and control of its target. The purpose of a violent action is to exercise power over another and keep them from having any control in the situation. Once the victim is powerless, the offender is able to take control and take or do whatever they want. Using violence is one way of keeping a victim fearful, and sometimes obedient, for fear of more violence. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.)

Battering is another term for abuse that refers to the condition of the victim or the offender. This term is often used if the abusive behavior has gone on for a long period of time or has occurred frequently. Research has found repeatedly that violent acts and abusive behaviors are rarely one-time occurrences. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) Often battering goes on for long periods of time before the victim realizes the consequences of the situation or is able to seek help.

Family Violence refers to abusive actions and behaviors from one family member/ relative to another. The word “family” does not mean that the abuser is a necessarily a blood relative, it could include anyone in the home or extended family. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) For instance a step-parent, boyfriend/girlfriend, or relative in-law can often be the offender or the victim. There is no way for shelter employees to know who the abuser is until the victim is ready to identify them. Each case of family violence is different, so shelter staff cannot assume that victims all have the same issues or goals.

Unhealthy relationships are based on power and control instead of equality and respect. Healthy relationships exist when there is an equal balance of power and decision making between the people involved and each party has the right to voice their thoughts and feelings. Another factor that keeps relationships balanced is respect for each person’s personal rights and attributes. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) When these aspects are no longer balanced, an environment of control, disrespect, and mistreatment can develop. It is up to individuals to recognize when relationships become unbalanced and be able to end them before they become violent.

Many people, including victims of abuse, believe that violence is only caused by alcoholism, or drug abuse, or bad tempers. Many battered women convince themselves that they have done something wrong, and somehow deserve to be punished. However, these things are common excuses for the violent behaviors that would already exist without their influence. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) Some personalities and socialization factors predispose people to violent behavior. The biggest mistake is for victims to blame themselves for the actions of their abusers.

Family Violence Research

Several themes found in previous research studies reflect the findings of this project. From several angles, previous studies have explored issues of battered women that include housing, counseling, shelter services, childcare, mental/emotional health, and effects of abuse itself. These categories help explain the larger issue of family violence by breaking down information that has been gathered into smaller pieces. This helps us to better understand how abusive relationships can affect several aspects of a person's life.

As previously mentioned, abuse can occur in many forms other than physical violence. It is not necessary to list the possible physical injuries that may occur as a result of family violence; however, the following section outlines some other results that abusive situations can eventually produce.

Abuse and its Effects

Family violence in any of its forms has the ability to affect several aspects of a person's life. (Riger, Raja, and Camancho 2002) Unhealthy relationships with family members and intimate partners can distort other otherwise healthy relationships with coworkers, children, and other members of the community. Stephanie Riger (et al. 2002) conducted a study to track how the effects of an abusive relationship spread through a person's entire network of associations such as work, school, supportive family members, neighbors, etc. The research argued that while an abused person may think that the problem only effects them, the reality is that one bad relationship or violent incident has a ripple effect into the people that surround her on intimate, familial, and acquaintance levels. (Riger et al. 2002)

Research has noted time and again that leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time in a woman's life.(Chanley, Chanley, and Campbell 2001; Krishnan, Hilbert, McNeil, and Newman 2004) A repeating statistic claims that 30% of female deaths each year are caused by intimate partners, meaning the victims are killed by former husbands, lovers, or boyfriends.(Chanley et al. 2001)Usually, the severity and potential for violence increases dramatically once a victim attempts to leave an abusive situation. "Separation violence is the violence that results when a battered woman attempts to leave her abuser and, consequently, his violence escalates. Ironically, women are at the greatest risk of serious injury and death when they are ending an abusive relationship."(Chanley et al. 2001, 406) It is also well documented that victims of abuse attempt to leave an average of six to nine times before successfully seeking help. (Gorde,

Helfrich, and Finlayson 2004) During the time in between violent episodes, women often try to “fix” their behaviors that abusers say caused the abuse; or they try to fight back by themselves until they come to a breaking point and seek help. This pattern of leaving and returning results in high rates of repeat victimization, meaning that leaving one violent episode can actually lead to several more that the victim has to endure.(Chanley et al. 2001)

The biggest mysteries for researchers and individuals are why battered women stay in abusive relationships, and what makes them return once they have left. Qualitative and quantitative research has found many differing reasons through surveys and interviews with survivors of abuse and shelter clients. Because each victim’s experience is different, the following reasons are general and may not all apply to every situation.

One major deciding factor for women wanting to leave their abusive relationships is the availability of resources. (Chanley et al. 2001; Riger et al. 2002; Krishnan et al. 2004) Having the support of family members or friends, money to live independently, or an organization dedicated to helping women in similar situations, are all resources that make it easier for battered women to leave abuse behind. However, access to these resources is not always easy to find. Isolation due to abuse can cut down a woman’s support network, so she may feel she has no one to talk to or nowhere to go. Also, battered women rarely have control over their own finances or that of their partner because economic isolation is often used to control the actions of the victim. Therefore, many women remain in abusive situations because they are financially dependent on their abuser due to lack of a job or their own income. (Gorde et al. 2004)

Researchers have listed several other factors that women have considered for staying in abusive relationships. Social role expectations, especially for married women and mothers, add pressure to women to fulfill their duties. (Krishnan et al. 2004) Some women have been quoted as being reluctant to leave the father of their children.(Riger et al. 2002) All this despite the fact that when the abuser exploited the female role, he would “attack her competence as a person, woman, worker, wife ,(and)mother.”(Watts 2003, 4) Also, familial pressure or religious beliefs could potentially keep a battered woman in an unhealthy relationship because she was lead to believe that leaving would be wrong. Yet, the most common reasons for battered women to return to their partners are threats the abuser poses to the victim, children, and other family members. (Krishnan et al. 2004)

Satya Krishnan (et al.2004) conducted a study which categorized shelter clients by their intensions, those who would return to their abusive partner, those who would not return, and those who were undecided about what to do when they entered the shelter. The study concluded that women who intended to return to abuse were older, married, and had more children than those who did not intend to return. The study also found that those who did not intend to return were more prone to reporting to law enforcement and seeking counseling than others. (Krishnan et al. 2004)

The upheaval of self, children, and belongings is a very difficult thing to do, especially if a battered woman has nowhere to go. Leaving an abusive environment, especially one’s own home, causes anxiety, and the unstable living conditions that ensue make difficult situations even harder to handle. Battered women often have very little

control over their lives while living in abusive situations, and the perceived lack of control continues even after they leave.(Gorde et al. 2004)

Abuse, whether escaped or endured, can have lasting effects on its victims. Family violence could potentially worsen other issues and lead to homelessness, mental illness, unemployment, poverty, and divorce, not to mention physical injuries or health problems. Research and experience tells us that emotional and psychological damage caused by family violence lasts much longer than physical damage. (Krishnan et al. 2004) Bruises may fade and bones may heal, but some victims of abuse never recover from depression, anxiety, and mental illnesses that result from family violence.(Gorde et al. 2004; Chanley et al. 2001) Increases in suicide attempts, social isolation, and drug or alcohol abuse are common for women who have experienced abuse. Victims may also develop conditions such as personality disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and social isolation. (Gorde et al. 2004)

Researchers have found Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to be very common amongst victims of family violence. One study tested the population of a family violence shelter and found tat 55-74% of victims experienced the symptoms of PTSD.(Gorde et al. 2004) Issues of sexual trauma have also been linked to family violence and intimate partner violence.(Shinsky 2003) While trauma symptoms vary, this population has commonly noted such symptoms as mentally re-experiencing the violence, fear of future abuse, and constant wondering if the abuser will find them.(Gorde et al. 2004; Riger et al. 2002) Studies have shown that the more trauma symptoms a victim has, the less ability they have to function on a daily basis.(Gorde et al. 2004)

Mental and emotional health are of fundamental importance for victims to overcome because they effect the ability for them to care for themselves and their children.(Krishnan et al. 2004)Traumatizing events such as abuse can make it difficult for a person to function on a daily basis. Activities such as working, taking care of children, or being able to collect one's thoughts, become increasingly difficult for battered persons who are mentally preoccupied with fear of more violence. Some women even become convinced that violence is inevitable in all relationships.(Riger et al. 2002)

Seeking Help

Shelter

Generally, the first goal of the family violence shelter is to provide “immediate refuge” from violence and help clients “avoid violent assaults.”(Chanley et al. 2001, 395) In addition to completing that mission, shelters provide a number of services which all aim to offer support, counsel, and guidance to victims of family violence. (Watt 2003) Some shelters expand their services to meet individual client needs. Because family violence cases are not all the same, it is important for shelters to consider the context of these women's lives. (Riger et al. 2002) Krishnan (et al. 2004) called for an improvement of shelter services that would “meet specific and differential needs.”(172) Becoming proactive in this way would make shelter services more effective and realistic. (Krishnan et al. 2004)

Other goals of family violence shelters include giving this population of battered women a voice in the community.(Watt 2003) By providing services and educating the

community to recognize what family violence is and how to prevent it, these organizations promote change.(Chanley et al. 2001)

Counseling

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of counseling services provided to victims of family violence. Services provided by counselors, therapists, and support groups have proven to have “significant benefits (victims) would be otherwise unlikely to obtain.”(Chanley et al. 2001, 304)

Previous studies have shown that the benefits of counseling are the most significant because of improvement in client attitude and self concept. For researchers these outcomes are not easy to measure, but they have been mentioned in countless interviews. Counseling boosts self esteem and motivates shelter clients to use the resources available to them. They also become more aware of skills that they could develop in order to better their situations.(Gorde et al. 2004)

The perspectives that shelter clients gain from shelter staff are very helpful because in most cases the shelter staff have a wider view of victims’ needs and responsibilities. Staff members remind clients that they must take care of themselves, plan for the future, and overall bring stability to their lives. Until they seek help, victims generally do not see ways out of their situations and have the tendency to have a very narrow focus when addressing their problems.(Gorde et al. 2004)

Housing

Finding permanent housing apart from an abusive situation is one of the most important steps a victim of abuse can take towards independence. Unfortunately, it is also one of the biggest obstacles for shelter clients to overcome. The first option for many battered women is to stay with supportive family members or friends. Although, this support system is often the most willing to help a victim in need, it is not always the safest option for battered women. The main safety issue for those staying with family members is that the batterer usually knows their location. If this is the case, the supportive family members or friends are taking the risk of potential harassment, threats, and physical danger. In addition, housing someone who is trying to escape a dangerous person is likely to cause increased fear for those providing shelter. (Riger et al. 2002)

Employment

Several factors in the lives of battered women effect their ability or freedom to work. Abusive men have been known to keep their partners in the home, some for reasons related to “male privilege” ideas that suggest women’s work is in the home, serving the male and raising children. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) In many situations, the victim has no job skills and therefore has a more difficult time becoming independent of the abuser.(Gorde et al. 2004) Other battered women may have lost their jobs due to fleeing their batterers, visible wounds and bruising, or had several absences because of injuries.(Riger et al. 2002; Gorde et al. 2004) Despite all these factors, shelter

clients have expressed the desire to be productive and financially independent.(Gorde et al. 2004)

Because of these anti-employment factors, research has only seen the low-income and unemployed population of battered women. Because of their sample, the Chanley study (et al. 2001) determined that only 1% of shelter clients were employed, but 100% of clients applied for public assistance. The study also claimed a pattern of abuse directly related to a client's income. The pattern stated that those with incomes of \$10,000 or below had the highest rate of violence. Meanwhile, those with an income of \$30,000 or more had the lowest rate of violence. (Chanley et al. 2001) While this pattern may be applicable to shelter clients, it should not be applied to the entire population of battered women.

Childcare

One major latent outcome of abuse is the possibility that a mother could lose custody of her child(ren) temporarily or permanently.(Riger et al. 2002) This is sometimes the case if a battered woman leaves her abusive situation and is forced to live on the streets. If the children are homeless or become truant from school, they are taken from their mother's possession by Child Protective Services. Or if there is abuse in the home, family members may take temporary or permanent custody of the children, to reduce their exposure to violence.(Chanley et al. 2001)

The best thing to do for children is to remove them from a violent environment. This reduces their exposure to violence, which is a learned behavior, and could possibly

prevent the child from developing anti-social behaviors.(Chanley et al. 2001) Shelter workers believe that working with children is important because the ways in which they respond to their individual situations and feelings about abuse could affect them throughout their lives.(Shinsky 2003)

For battered women who are trying to become independent, finding or providing childcare has been found to be a huge barrier in terms of employment and housing options.(Riger et al. 2002; Gorde et al. 2004) A mother cannot find a job without considering where her children would be while she was at work. Unless she has childcare in place, finding a job and permanent housing would be very difficult to do.

Legal Services

In recent decades, employing the legal system has become a major resource for battered women. Before the 1980's, the legal system took a "hands- off" approach when handling domestic violence issues in order to "protect family privacy." (Watts 2003, 4) Previously, the man was considered to be the master of his house and able to do as he pleased by common law, as long as he did not cause permanent damage. (Watts 2003)

Public policy has come a long way since then, but still has its imperfections. Currently, custody and visitation policies are based on a biased ideal of the nuclear family. Most cases that do not fit this family mold are not as protected by the law. The complaint now is that public policy cannot cover all the idiosyncrasies of one case without discriminating against the next case. It has become the job of social activist organizations, like women's shelters, to cover such gray areas and encourage victims to

make use of their legal rights.(Watts 2003, Chanley et al. 2001) Many believe that making legal assistance more affordable or available through pro bono efforts would answer a large portion of the demand by battered women. Educating victims of their legal rights and encouraging them to exercise them would benefit everyone involved.(Watts 2003, Chanley et al. 2001)

Working with Battered Women

Although it is difficult, shelter workers have agreed that working with battered women is a very rewarding experience. Many have said that you must prepare yourself for what you hear and witness and then compensate that with positive things. It is possible to balance your emotions and your personal life with this line of work. However, sometimes it can have a drain on your emotions or follow you home. Overall, shelter employees enjoy helping others and watching them overcome some of life's most traumatizing events.(Shinsky 2003)

General

Previous research has concluded that overall, the use of women's shelters has provided a socially valuable, and decidedly cost-effective, response to family violence. According to the Chanley (et al. 2001) study, the production of shelter services equates to six times their cost, meaning that for every dollar invested in a shelter, the services provided are valued at six dollars. Shelters across the country work to address the issues

facing victims of abuse that range from healing physical and emotional wounds to teaching money management and parenting skills.(Gorde et al. 2004)

Observational Data

During my semester of participant research in the shelter, much of the previous research done on victims of abuse came to life. Knowledge of the previous findings better equipped me to help and observe battered women in the shelter environment. The following sections outline the individual services provided by the shelter and other topics regarding my research experience. These services are available to the shelter residents who choose to use them, or are aspects of living in the shelter environment.

Human Resources

In addition to using previous research, I collected data for this project using the methodology of participant observation. I became an active advocate and part of the shelter staff. Because I worked in the shelter part time, I was involved with many aspects of daily functions, which allowed me to participate in my own research. As predicted by the Shelter Director, I learned the norms, values, and functions just by being present in the shelter and being part of the team.

Much of the information gathered for this project came from my own observations, informal interviews with other shelter staff, and information provided to me during advocate training and in the shelter employee manual. For confidentiality reasons I was not able to interview actual shelter clients about their personal experiences. Furthermore, my asking questions during their shelter stay would be inappropriate and possibly damaging to individuals in a state of crisis. Instead I collected the themed

observations of the shelter staff, who proved to be my most valuable and credible resources.

Apart from survivors of family violence, shelter employees are the most knowledgeable about the subject. In fact, some of my co-workers at the shelter are survivors as well as advocates. Living through such a life-altering experience becomes motivation to help others in some cases, and having that perspective makes the services that the shelter provides more personalized and significant. For those that are not survivors, extensive training and the experiences of what they see and work with everyday serve as knowledge enough to be a credible source for this project.

Other resources for this research project include the shelter's employee handbook, the packet of information given to shelter clients upon arrival, and advocate training materials. These sources were each compiled to serve a specific purpose and helped me adjust to working in the shelter environment, as well as be prepared to help people with whatever their situation may be. Advocate training, especially, taught the other volunteers and me the true meaning of advocacy and how to provide the support that victims need. These sources introduced the issues and policies regarding family violence and sexual assault in such a way that the advocates were able to mentally put themselves in a similar position to the victim and empathize with their situation.

Shelter Overview

The family violence crisis shelter does more than provide a safe place for women and children to go when they are in danger. Other services include emotional and legal

counseling, shelter for up to thirty days, and help finding employment and housing. These services help make it possible for women who intend to leave their batterers to become independent and able to live on their own. Each client's case is different, so the shelter tries to give the most personalized service possible. No matter what happens when they leave the shelter, taking just one step toward independence empowers these women to take control of their individual situations.

The main data from this participant research project are the themes of behavior, or **norms**, observed by shelter staff over several years of experience. To clarify, the term "norm" is defined as a cultural expectation attached to a role.(Johnson 2000) For example, the role of a nurse would include giving shots on a regular basis, and that would be considered a norm for that person. Collected from informal interviews with the shelter staff and general observation, these norms display the most common ways in which victims choose to confront their individual situations. Over several years of experience, shelter employees have noticed certain patterns that battered women sometimes follow pertaining to each of the following issues.

Shelter Stays

For women and children in crisis, a safe place to go that is away from the abusive situation can become a sanctuary. The Family Violence Crisis Shelter provides shelter to women and their children who are in immediate danger of escalating violence or are attempting to separate from abusive partners. Shelter is available for up to thirty days, but is available for use for as little as one night when needed. The shelter operates 365 days a

year with at least one staff person is available for services 24 hours a day. This facility can house up to ten families at a time. At full capacity the shelter is very busy, but is still manageable for the shelter's small staff.

The shelter is run by four main employees including the Shelter Director, Resident Counselor, House Manager, and Children's Program Coordinator and four to five overnight staff. The members of the shelter staff work very closely with one another in a team-like manner. Each person is trained to handle most situations so that one person can run the shelter if necessary. Staff communication and interactions are important because information on client progress or issues is being exchanged constantly. In order for situations to be handled properly, all staff members must be up to date on what has happened with each client. For example, the overnight shelter worker would need to be informed if clients broke the rules or need to be watched for safety reasons. Also, if a new client is expected to arrive, whoever is working needs to know basic information so that the client can be admitted into the shelter.

Usually, shelter requests are made over the phone through the main agency's hotline, and then eligibility is determined by the shelter staff on duty. Admittance into the shelter depends on space availability, size of family, and reasonable proof of danger. The staff person must use their judgment to determine if the caller has provided enough information and included certain details that make the story plausible. The staff must screen hotline calls for homeless families and others who need shelter but are not victims of abuse. In the past, there have been clients accepted under false pretenses, who simply tried to take advantage of the free services provided by the shelter.

As previously mentioned, a large portion of battered women attempt to leave their partners several times before they are successful.(Gorde et al. 2004) For this reason, many women have exhausted their support systems including places to stay, supportive family members, and finances. Staff members recognize that some shelter clients are likely to go back to their abusive partner, and they have seen several cases of repeat victimization. This means that over a period of ten years a single victim may come to the shelter for two to six separate shelter stays. After protecting victims of abuse, the ultimate goal for the shelter is to help survivors live independently outside of the original abusive situation. Previous studies have mentioned that the best indicator of whether the victim will leave the abuser is her own statement of intention upon entering the shelter.(Krishnan et al. 2004)

The Need for Safety

The previous research outlined earlier, well documented that the most dangerous time in a woman's life is when she is attempting to separate from an abusive partner.(Chanley et al. 2001; Krishnan et al. 2004; Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) When the abuser knows the locations of friends and family's homes, those places are not completely safe. However, because the shelter's main purpose is to protect those in danger, the shelter's location is not listed to enhance security.

Several other security measures have been taken by shelter staff to ensure the safety of their clients. Systems like security alarms and sign-out sheets make sure that

each resident is accounted for. Also, an early evening curfew of 8 P.M. forces the clients to be inside before dark, at which time the shelter is locked up for the night.

Because shelter clients interact with one another, an additional safety measure is taken to protect client identities. Before entering the housing section of the shelter for the first time, clients must sign confidentiality agreements, stating that they will not reveal the location of the shelter or the identities of other clients. The shelter staff feels that locked doors, security cameras, and a secret location are generally enough to keep the clients safe and protected from abusers.

Communal Living and Client Interactions

The shelter houses up to ten families at a time. Each client and her children (if any) are assigned one bedroom to share and provided with personal necessities such as toiletries, clean towels, and some clothes if they are needed. The residents of two or three neighboring bedrooms share a bathroom that is either located between the bedrooms or down the hall.

All shelter clients share typical household responsibilities such as cooking meals and doing chores. The shelter staff has organized a daily schedule consisting of designated times for residents to wake up, receive supplies, eat meals, and do chores. This schedule provides a sense of structure and order that is designed to motivate clients. It is meant to empower shelter residents, and having a daily agenda gives many clients a sense of control and productiveness to the day. For many, taking on these small responsibilities makes them feel as though they are contributing to the group, which can

be really important to their sense of self. Structure often helps residents focus on taking care of themselves and taking steps to solve their problems. The idea is that contributing to the group eventually results in confidence.

Although most residents do not have a problem with following the rules, contributing to the house chores, and following the daily schedule, the adjustment can be hard for new clients who are not accustomed to that amount of order. The structure allows ample time for residents to take care of their needs whether they include attending counseling sessions, running errands, or seeking employment. Often clients will take outings together depending on who has transportation and can arrange for childcare. Because these activities are not controlled by the shelter, the residents are able to make their own decisions and take care of their needs. This system also puts responsibility into the residents' hands which can be empowering for them.

Another important aspect of communal living is the potential for in-house childcare. Because the shelter does not yet have the resources to provide childcare, it is beneficial for clients to share childcare responsibilities. The shelter's policy towards women with children is that the mother is completely responsible for her child(ren). This means that she must provide childcare at all times, unless she has another arrangement. It is possible for shelter residents to "baby sit" for each other, but requires a signed agreement from both clients and must have a specific time frame. Usually this system works because the residents are willing to trade equally and help each other by either paying the "baby-sitter" if they are able, taking turns watching each other's child(ren), or providing transportation to that person.

Through interviews and observation I found that communal living is a very useful tool for shelter residents. My supervisor described the housing section of the shelter as “one big support group”(informal interview with the Resident Counselor). Whether residents take advantage of counseling services or not, they often share their stories with each other and find common ground. The most important aspect of living with other victims of abuse is for individuals to know that they are not alone and they have somewhere to go where people will understand their situation.

It is very common for residents to become friends or confide in each other about their problems. Most often, a client with children will befriend another mother, or other commonalities will bring people together by simply interacting with each other on a daily basis. These informal interactions that take place in the shelter’s common areas often contribute to the levels of support and encouragement that clients need to put the pieces of their lives back together.

When put into a group situation, some clients fall into differing roles such as the mother hen, the busy bee, or the bubbly personality. For example, mother hens generally try to take care of and help everyone else, often putting themselves on the bottom of the priority list. Helping others is always a nice gesture, but it is not beneficial if the helper avoids her own issues because of it. The role of the busy bee can vary from clients who work hard on all of their paperwork and issues, to those who constantly find projects so they have something to focus on. This role is beneficial for those who have to keep legal issues and documentation in order. Whatever the role a client plays within the group, each person’s interactions have an impact on the others in some way.

Mental and Emotional Health

The shelter often has clients with various kinds of mental illnesses or emotional issues that range from anxiety, to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, to increased chances of suicide attempts. The most common traits for victims of abuse are anxiety and situational depression. Several clients coming from abusive environments, have conditioned themselves to walk on eggshells to avoid causing further anger and violence from their batterer, resulting in high levels of nervousness and anxiety. In addition, clients often feel guilty for leaving their abuser or blame themselves for the abuse. This kind of thought process is very common, and called situational depression because it is a direct result of the abusive situation, unlike clinically diagnosed depression.

Other conditions that are clinically diagnosed such as depression and bi-polar disorder are additional concerns for battered women, especially if they do not have the proper medication. The Resident Counselor recommends that clients seek medical insurance or some way to meet with local doctors to diagnose these disorders, be evaluated, and can get their medicine. The main concern is that without medication, those with disorders could continue to put themselves in dangerous situations, and not be able to focus on healing emotionally.

As mentioned in previous research, family violence could also lead to drug or alcohol abuse for many female victims. The shelter does not allow any kind of drug or alcohol usage for its residents. When clients are in need of rehabilitation type services, they are referred to local agencies that are better equipped to handle the issues

surrounding addictions or drug use, such as rehabilitation centers. This policy also keeps the shelter safe for other clients who do not use drugs and alcohol.

Mental and emotional health is a focal point of healing for many clients. Emotional and psychological abuse have long lasting effects on their victims that could continue to prevent their well being for years after the abuse stops. The shelter's goal is for clients to recognize their problems and take the steps to change their situations for the better. Taking care of oneself, mentally and emotionally, is essential for the victim's ability to function on a daily basis and care for her family.

Counseling Interaction- More Than Emotional Healing

As mentioned in previous research, the seeking of counseling services is the most beneficial step towards healing for victims of abuse, mostly because those services are able to encompass several issues. Every member of the shelter staff is considered a qualified peer counselor, meaning that they do not have to be licensed to listen to clients and recommend services. However, one of the four main shelter employees, the Resident Counselor, handles the majority of counseling duties. Counseling is not limited to emotional healing, but includes giving referrals for other issues such as immigration status, securing low-income insurance for children, and also applications for federal or state services available to single women, single mothers, or low income families. The Resident Counselor acts as the information liaison for clients and helps guide them in their decision making processes. Each counseling session is private and confidential,

meaning the information shared will not be repeated to anyone except other staff members when necessary.

Unlike some other shelter organizations, counseling in this shelter is voluntary, and clients are not forced to have sessions with the Resident Counselor. The minimum counseling services clients receive are in the form of worksheets included in their intake forms. These questionnaires help to determine the emotional status of the victim and outline several goals for the client to work toward. These worksheets are usually completed upon entering the shelter or soon afterward.

From the Resident Counselor's perspective, the primary objective in counseling is for clients to identify the family violence issues that they have experienced such as verbal or emotional abuse, belittling, humiliation, threats, physical violence, sexual assault, and so on. Often the clients do not recognize abusive behavior while it is going on, and mostly minimize the consequences, thinking that their partner must have just been angry or they did something wrong to deserve it. The first message that the counselor wants to get across to a new client is that the abuse is not the client's fault and that they are not alone. The counselor sometimes uses example scenarios that illustrate differing types of abuse so it is easier for clients to talk about their situations. This is also a way for the counselor to explain to the clients that abuse is not just physical, and many of them are surprised when she names differing types that they have gone through. "Even though abusive behavior is going on, until they get hit, they do not know that they are being abused." (Informal interview with the Resident Counselor) At that point counseling sessions focus on identifying abusive behavior patterns in others (usually their partner),

and how to avoid people that display controlling and violent personalities. It is important for victims to see the bigger picture of abuse so they can know what they have been through and then heal and learn from it.

A secondary benefit of counseling is setting goals for clients to work towards during their stay in the shelter. Goals can refer to anything from settling legal issues such as divorce or child custody to taking care of oneself emotionally or becoming a better parent. Whatever the purposes of the counseling sessions, they serve as a time for clients to form safety plans of action and become organized enough to act on it. Again, clients choose their own goals by talking to the counselor and taking surveys in which they identify the goals they would like to work towards.

Counseling is also an important agent of emotional healing for most shelter clients. For many battered women, re-telling their story during a counseling session can be empowering, but can also be scary. Recounting events or simply saying things out loud is not always easy to do. Once the problem has been expressed, the client can take steps toward healing because they are no longer keeping their lives and experiences a secret. The Resident counselor has found that clients gain reassurance and empathy from telling their story, and even that small amount of support is really important. She also noted that the more clients talk, the better they feel afterward. However, it is never easy for victims to open up or express their problems until they develop a relationship with a counselor.

For the Resident Counselor, it is important to establish rapport with individual clients because more progress can be made when the client and counselor are comfortable with each other. Often, more and more details of a victim's situation come to light once

this relationship develops. “Clients will rarely tell you the whole story in the first meeting. Once they are comfortable they will tell you more.”(Informal interview with the Resident Counselor) Not only is it important for the counselor to listen, but also that she gives feedback to clients. Most often she encourages clients and has to remind them to take the time to sort out their feelings and focus on taking care of themselves, emotionally and in the context of everyday living. Established rapport also makes it easier for the counselor to make suggestions or recommendations in other areas of counseling.

The Resident Counselor also serves as the legal advocate for the shelter. This person has the connections and applications for several different legal services and needs. Shelter staff members are not attorneys and therefore do not give legal advice. However, the legal advocate is able to recommend services and agencies according to individual client needs and goals. The applications for the most common services are available through the legal advocate, who is also available to help clients complete the forms. Court accompaniment is also available for clients who need support during court proceedings such as custody hearings or criminal trials. The reason for court accompaniment is to personally support clients and ensure them that they are not alone.

Victims of abuse have the right to exercise the legal system for their protection. Often applying for basic protective orders through the local district attorney’s office is one of many immediate legal solutions to deter future abuse. By utilizing the legal system, the victim is taking steps to regain control of her and her family’s situation. This is often a sign that the victim intends to gain complete independence from the batterer.

The legal services that are most commonly asked for include protective orders, crime victim's compensation, and legal aid. A protective order prevents the abuser from coming into physical contact with a victim and her children for up to two years. If the order is breached, the abuser can be arrested. Crime Victim's Compensation is a fund dedicated to repairing damages caused by crime. In the case of family violence, it can pay for medical expenses, temporary housing, childcare, and other things that victims need the most after a violent incident. Legal aid services are available to low-income clients who have several legal issues to deal with at once. Usually a legal aid attorney is a practicing attorney who does some work free-of-charge, or is employed by an agency that provides legal services to low-income people.

In all of its forms, counseling is an important resource for clients who are willing to work on improving themselves or their situation. Whether working on one issue or several at a time, counseling does a lot to boost the self esteem of victims, which is a major source of comfort and motivation. Once clients regain their sense of self and identity, they tend to be more optimistic about their future and work harder toward their individual goals.

Independence through Employment

For many women, a part of being abused was being kept from having a job or going to school. The shelter's Resident Counselor has observed that over time, some women are convinced (by the influence of the abuser) that they are not qualified, or worthy, or educated enough to work anywhere. Some abusers adhere to the traditional

roles for men and women, where women have no rights and only fulfill domestic duties. Clients can become so downtrodden that they think they are not able to hold a job.

For these reasons, clients feel limited in terms of jobs they could look for once they separate from their abuser. Regardless of skill, when the shelter clients look for jobs out of desperation, they tend to take whatever they can find. Sometimes this approach can have positive outcomes, especially if the client finds a job that is steady enough for her to earn money for an apartment and put things in order. However, some employers with questionable ethics and standards, exploit their employees and do not offer fair or steady work. Transportation to and from work can be another limiting factor if shelter clients do not have their own vehicle, or another way to get to work. The shelter in this study is not exactly in a central location, but numerous clients have been able to find work within walking distance.

For most shelter clients, who have no other source of income or money of their own, finding a job is a major factor in becoming independent. Being able to make future plans and to work toward goals, such as an apartment or childcare, also increases the level of a client's self-esteem. Working for what you have while having a support system like the shelter can really improve a dismal situation. Finding a job during a shelter stay seems to be the achievement that makes the other issues more attainable. With a steady job in place, other goals can appear within the client's grasp.

Where to Live

While attempting to heal from traumatic events usually tops the average client priority list, the boding question for all shelter residents is where to go once they leave the shelter. Arranging permanent or temporary housing is usually one of the last goals that shelter residents must decide on before leaving the shelter. For some clients, it is the only goal to meet. For victims who intend to leave their abusive situations, finding temporary or permanent housing is necessary to establish independence. Because the shelter program is available for up to thirty days, finding the next place to stay or live is of utmost importance. Ideally, this period of time gives clients an established window of opportunity to make whatever arrangements they need, such as finding employment, taking care of legal or financial issues, and making feasible plans for the future. However, it does not always allow enough time for clients to accomplish everything.

Shelter clients often qualify for low-income housing once they have established employment, but this option usually involves a lengthy waiting list that could take one to two years to place a shelter client. More immediate options include finding a reasonably cheap apartment, house, or room for rent. The shelter does not provide transitional housing for victims of abuse at this point in time, due to lack of resources. Therefore, finding housing is solely the client's responsibility. Clients must be approved for an apartment or a house on their own, with no assistance from the shelter. However, when clients do get ready to move, the shelter's Donation Coordinator meets some of their household needs by providing donated home materials such as dishes, some furniture, and bedding. It is also possible for shelter clients to have fees like utility, gas, and phone

services to be waived for the first few months of living outside the shelter, by completing forms from the local utility company. Apart from providing supplies, the shelter has very little to do with the housing outcomes of shelter clients.

Other clients, who choose not to live locally, generally make arrangements to relocate closer to a support system to escape abuse. After a shelter stay, several family violence victims arrange to move in with supportive family members or friends that are willing to help them. This situation has several potential outcomes that depend on the level of danger presented from the abuser and several other circumstantial factors. Often family members are a great source of comfort and support during a transitional period. They help meet childcare needs and stabilize the home environment for everyone involved. Also, the ability of the victim to contribute to the household either monetarily or in any other form can make this situation beneficial for everyone.

However, for some, moving in with a family member or friend is not beneficial. It is important to point out that if a victim has a history of abuse in their childhood, from their parents, they do not have the option of returning to their original family. This makes it more difficult for clients in that situation to find a safe source of support. In other cases, the host can be overprotective or want to take charge of the victim's life in order to fix it, which is not the kind of help victims need. Because family violence or abuse is based on power and control of another person, victims living in another situation without the authority to make decisions, changes very little. (Dynamics of Family Violence. Nd.) Living with family members or friends is also potentially dangerous if the batterer knows

the location of their homes or phone numbers. When housing a victim of abuse, the host takes the risk of threats, harassment, or even physical danger from the abuser.

The ways in which this family violence crisis shelter has addressed these issues is evidence of their extensive knowledge of the behaviors of battered women and their experience in providing direct services. Their system of identifying different types of abuse and encouraging victims to have plans for their future is designed to give clients a sense of safety and control over their own lives. Taking steps toward independence, healing, or regaining self-respect can make all the difference when trying to end an abusive relationship.

Discussion

This project has taught me that social issues like Family Violence involve so much more than the simple definitions we give them. Abuse is more than physical violence; it is a controlling pattern of behavior that can have lasting and damaging effects on its victims. Battered women have problems other than abusive partners, including mental illness, financial problems, and lack of options. But they also have a safe place to go to escape more violence. They have the right to protect themselves by reporting violence to law enforcement. And through counseling, victims can learn about the patterns of unhealthy relationships and how to avoid abusive situations in the future.

For victims of abuse, seeking the help of family, friends, or shelters is difficult to do, but is more beneficial than we could ever know. Occasionally, a shelter employee or close friend of a victim is able to see how much progress one person can make once they leave an abusive situation. However, shelter workers rarely know what happens to a client once they leave the shelter grounds. The hope is that during a client's shelter stay, some member of the shelter staff said something that has become useful for that client. Even if it takes several years to be realized, the shelter staff tries to plant seeds of confidence that will someday help a client overcome the events they have been through.

The participant research presented here was completed in hopes that information about the inner workings of the shelter environment could expand the public's view of an issue that the average person knows very little about. Because the subject of family violence is somewhat hushed in our society and the population of battered women is very difficult to study, this research may be beneficial to further the effort to end family

violence. Although my time in the shelter and access to clients was limited, I cannot deny that this experience has shown me the amount of change that direct service agencies, such as the shelter, make possible.

This study produced its findings using qualitative methods, including informal interviews and field observations. Although the shelter staff members were not able to give statistics or share specific occurrences, the themes of behavior that they observed covered several years and countless shelter clients. There is no way to know, without further study, that the norms and interactions that took place in this shelter environment were any different from those of other shelters across the country. In the future, research may want to address the varying impacts that rural shelter environments have in different regions of the country, which was not available in this study.

From my observations, I have found that Family Violence Crisis Shelters, like the one in this study, exist to provide the services that victims need to regain control over their lives. They are places of refuge and safety where clients can heal, rejuvenate, and learn that they are not alone. Although they are available to clients, the services offered by the shelter can only help as much as the victim is willing to let them. The shelter I am working in, allows battered women to make their own decisions and goals, which will then be realized only when they are ready. Making the transition from victim of abuse to survivor of abuse is the most significant change that could take place in this type of shelter. By empowering the clients in these ways, the shelter prepared these women for independent living in the community.

Conclusion

Family violence is not a topic that affects one person at a time. While the physical impact may be targeted toward one person, the victim is not the only one who suffers or feels the potential effects of abuse. When violence exists in the home, it affects every person in the household, friends, other family members, co-workers, neighbors, and anyone else who has a connection to the abuser or the abused. For this reason, it is important to create an environment where violence is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.

Unfortunately, as long as family violence is a problem in any community, the services of family violence crisis shelters will be socially necessary. However, spreading awareness about healthy and unhealthy relationships and educating the public about the services available to victims could help end family violence. As evident by this research, the services provided by shelters and other such organizations can have infinite benefits for those who learn from them. If the public knew more about the services, they may be more likely or more willing to contribute time, money, or services in individual communities. The overall goal is to create an environment where family violence will not be tolerated.

Working inside the shelter has opened my eyes to the issues that surround family violence and has made me more aware of the positive changes that victims can make to their lives because of shelter services. I think everyone should be informed of what goes on behind the scenes if it would increase awareness and cooperation in working with survivors of abuse.

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“Dynamics of Family Violence” in *Hays-Caldwell Women’s Center Advocate Training*

Manual. Unpublished Manuscript, received Jan 2007 include original handouts, brochures, and information adapted from the following sources:

Texas Council on Family Violence. (http://tcfv.org/about_tcfv/rc.html)

Texas Family Code: Sec.71.004. “Family Violence”

(<http://tlo2.tlc.state.tx.us/statutes/fa.toc.html>)

Texas Health and Human Services Commission

(<http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/default.html>)

Welsh Women’s Aid

(<http://www.welshwomensaid.org/whatis/mythsandreality.html>)