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Serving Women Who Use Force in Their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

An Extended View

Lisa Young Laranca

This article explores the author's practice observations while working with women who use force (WWUF) in their intimate heterosexual relationships. The VISTA Program's approach to assessment, education and support, and advocacy frames a description of the impact services have had on the lives of WWUF. By contextualizing a woman's experiences, with the aid of the ecological nested model, VISTA staff tailor services to member needs. This article's purpose is to provide an extended view of serving WWUF, one grounded in a "healing place" approach that builds on traditional survivors support group strengths and is distinctly different from batterers' intervention.

Keywords: domestic violence; social work practice; women who use force

The Anti-Domestic Violence Movement at a Crossroads

For more than 30 years, anti-domestic violence advocates have worked tirelessly to raise public awareness of intimate partner violence, particularly abuse of women at the hands of their intimate partners. Where there were no shelters or funding sources to assist battered women, grassroots advocates stepped in to ameliorate the problem by volunteering time, energy, and resources. Their cumulative efforts turned the tide and laid the foundation for a powerful anti-domestic violence movement. In the process, advocates and practitioners—spurred on by the feminist philosophy of

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women helping women—increasingly provided survivors of domestic violence the opportunity to live safer lives than they thought possible once their spiral of abuse began (Dasgupta, 2002; Schechter, 1982; Worcester, 2002).

However, in the early 1990s, those in the movement began to notice an apparent rise in individual and dual arrest rates (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Martin, 1997; S. L. Miller, 2001) among battered women. This, along with decontextualized research based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), fueled a perception that women's violence was becoming more prevalent (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Kimmel, 2002) across the United States and that rates of domestic violence among men and women were equivalent (Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 1997). However, when motivation, intent, and impact were used to distinguish between violent actions, researchers and advocates (Dasgupta, 2002; Kimmel, 2002; Lischick, 1999; Saunders, 1986; Worcester, 2002) established that women and men do not use force or violent behaviors equally and that, in fact, the majority of women who use force against their partners are survivors of domestic violence (Edelson, 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Saunders, 1986, 2002).¹

Responding to the perceived increase in women's arrests, the criminal justice system sought batterer intervention programs for women charged with domestic violence offenses. Advocates and practitioners were then in the awkward position of having to respond to court decrees while not knowing the appropriate way to do so. Some continue to question whether or not there should be specific intervention programs, apart from traditional domestic violence support groups, for women who use force (Osthoff, 2002; Worcester, 2002) because they view women's use of force as survival mechanisms that do not demand a separate response. Other "community-based battered women's [programs] . . . will not assist battered women charged with crimes (especially if the alleged crime is an assault against her partner) because, they say, they cannot or will not work with 'perpetrators'" (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1527).

Deciding to Serve Women Who Use Force

Jersey Battered Women's Services (JBWS) staff became part of the women who use force discussion through participation on the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women's (NJCBW) subcommittee on women's use of force. JBWS staff knew that women's use of force was nothing new, as nonresidential program support group survivors had long discussed their self-defensive and retaliatory use of force in their intimate relationships. But what was new and troubling about the changing climate that catalyzed the growing discussion was that battered women were now becoming involved in the legal system as perpetrators for their use of force in intimate relationships. JBWS staff grew particularly concerned because those who desperately needed services—the women who use force—were becoming lost in the controversy between the criminal justice system, child protective services, researchers, advocates, and practitioners. As employees of a well-established domestic violence

agency, the organization's leaders were confident that JBWS could play a positive role in the evolving process of addressing women's use of force.

As an ongoing part of this process, the VISTA Program was created. The name *VISTA* was chosen to indicate the program's "extended view" of women's use of force. Its creation and implementation were driven by a realization that women who use force do not have institutional support, let alone the appropriate assessment, education and support, and advocacy to address their complex circumstances (Osthoff, 2002). Therefore, VISTA's general goals are to provide these missing resources. JBWS staff believe it is the agency's role to advocate on behalf of all people in unsafe intimate relationships, regardless of their gender or criminal history.

Women Who Use Force: The Power of Language

Appropriately addressing women's use of force must begin with clear language that truly speaks to women's experiences (Osthoff, 2002). Developing and consistently using specific, nonjudgmental language is an integral and ongoing component of the detailed VISTA Program process, one that entails advocating for and educating women who use force while simultaneously educating the institutions with which they come into contact. For this purpose and the purpose of this article, the term *women who use force* is used as an umbrella term that refers to physically, verbally, and emotionally detrimental behaviors used by a woman toward her intimate partner. In contrast, House (2001) defines violence as "a type of force used unjustly with the intention of causing injury. Force itself is descriptive of the use of physical strength to accomplish a task—but does not imply the same degree of wrong-doing or harmful intent" (p. 2). VISTA Program staff use the term *use of force* to identify women who have used both primary and retaliatory aggression in their intimate relationships. Likewise, *men who use force*, when spoken of in the VISTA setting, refers to men who have used physical, verbal, and/or emotional behaviors that the women describe as primary and retaliatory aggression.

In contrast, *battering* is defined and understood as a systematic pattern of violence, the threat of violence, and/or other coercive behaviors and/or tactics, with the intention of exerting power, inducing fear, and/or controlling another person (Dasgupta, 1999, 2002; House, 2001; Osthoff, 2002; Stark, 1995). Also referred to as *coercive control* (Stark, 1995), battering often combines assault with intimidation, isolation, and control. Battering's infrastructure does not necessarily involve violence with weapons, but its cumulative effects—be they physical, verbal, situational—destroy an individual's access to basic personal liberties. "Battering is far more than a single event . . . because it teaches a profound lesson about who controls a relationship and how that control will be exercised" (Schechter, 1982, p. 17). It is important to note that violence, use of force, and battering are not acceptable ways to express anger. However, just because an individual used violence and/or force once does not make that person a batterer (Dasgupta, 1999; House, 2001). In short, "Not

everyone who hits [her] partner is a batterer. A hit is not a hit is not a hit. Context matters. A lot. A whole lot" (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1540).

Like others (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Osthoff, 2002), VISTA Program staff observed that women have the capacity to batter. One member of the VISTA Program struggled weekly to change her battering behavior, behavior that had destroyed more than one of her intimate relationships. In general, however, VISTA staff observed that the majority of heterosexual women in VISTA used force in their intimate relationships to gain short-term control over their situations, not to exert ongoing coercion and control over their partners. It is critical that the distinction among use of force, violence, and battering be made at every step in VISTA assessment, education and support, and advocacy. When appropriately deconstructed for the listener, the linguistic distinctions send a message to the women, their partners, the courts, and referring agencies that most women's use of force is a separate, distinct behavior from battering (Dasgupta, 2002; Osthoff, 2002) and demands different intervention.

In this process of creating a language, VISTA Program philosophy aligns with Osthoff's (2002) point:

We need more accurate labels . . . why can't we call the people who have been hit by their partners, "have been hit by partner" and those who have hit their partners, "have hit partner"? . . . We need to do a much better job when we label those who use violence against their partners. (p. 1531)

In the VISTA Program, for example, a woman who is a survivor of domestic violence and who has used force is referred to as "a survivor of domestic violence who began using force against her partner 17 years into the relationship," or "She is not a survivor of domestic violence but uses force and believes her actions do not serve her in her relationship." It is more time-consuming to speak about women in VISTA in this way. But with this specific language, discussions with advocates inside and outside the agency, and with referring agencies, are more productive and less emotionally charged (Osthoff, 2002). Thoughtful language is pivotal to interagency coalition building.

Furthermore, it is critical that appropriate language is used when speaking with women in VISTA. When a VISTA staff person speaks with clarity and uses non-judgmental language in reference to the woman's actions and history, the VISTA staff person is taking the first step in partnering with the woman in her journey from shame and guilt for her actions toward workable alternatives, acknowledging the role choice plays in expressing her feelings. Nonjudgmental language models a non-judgmental approach that paves the way for a woman's introspection. VISTA members are eager to learn the distinctions among the terms *women who use force*, *violence*, and *battering*. This immediately helps them begin to make sense of their situations and name behaviors they may have found difficult naming in the past,

which underscores Osthoff's (2002) point, "If we talk with clarity about women's use of violence, we will enhance our credibility and make our services more welcoming to battered women who use violence" (p. 1538).

Ecological Nested Model (ENM)

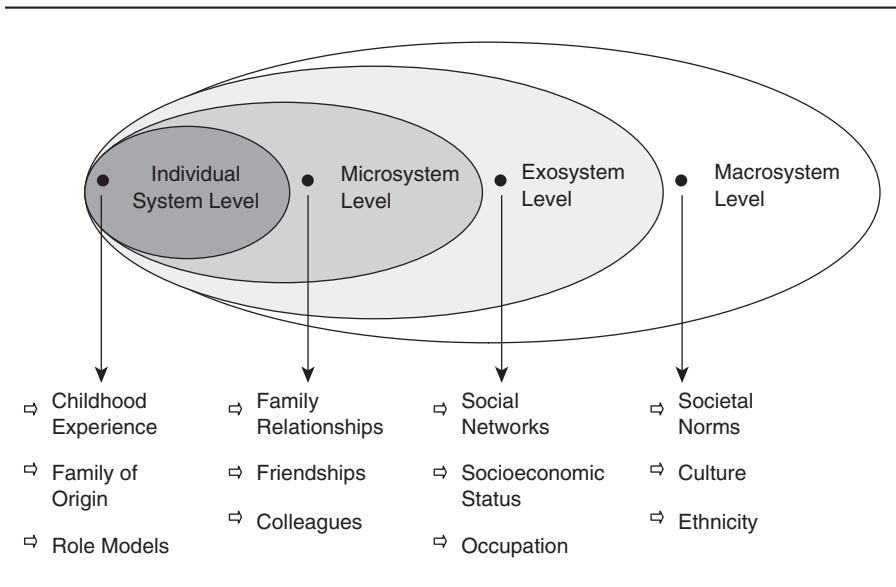
As appropriate language is critical to productive discussions concerning women who use force, an appropriate framework for assessing, understanding, and then addressing women's use of force is paramount. Dasgupta (1999) reminds us that "intimate violence does not occur in a vacuum. It is nested within the sociocultural context of a nation and is maintained, as well as supported, by its structures" (p. 200). When addressing women's use of force the meaning and consequences of that force, rather than isolated incidents, must be the focus (Worcester, 2001). The ENM (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; UNIFEM, 2003), according to Dasgupta (2002), is the most appropriate tool for understanding women's use of force because it allows analysis of women's violence from a multilayered and interactive perspective, one that

provides us with a valid and complex understanding of violence by women as it takes into account the interactions of antecedents (e.g., historical context, social prescriptions of gender roles, social and legal reactions) as well as immediate conditions and consequences (e.g., early socialization, individual experiences, intentions, partner's responses, repercussions on the individual as well as work and family) of such actions. It helps ascertain the full contexts of women's experiences in their use of violence. (p. 1376)

The four interrelated levels of the ENM are (a) the individual level that explores a woman's perspective of her childhood experiences, including family of origin, socialization, and role models; (b) the micro-system level that encompasses a woman's current family, situational, friendship, and workplace relationships; (c) the exosystem level that involves the formal and informal structures and institutions with which a woman comes into contact throughout her life such as social networks, socioeconomic status, and occupation; and (d) the macro-system level that addresses the societal norms that govern a woman's life experiences, such as her culture and ethnicity. Figure 1 provides examples of the ENM's four interactive layers.

VISTA Program staff understand that, as a social service domestic violence agency, the program's role and goal are separate and distinct from those of law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and child protective services. With this understanding comes a deeper commitment to the necessity of critically evaluating women's use of force by contextualizing it. Using the ENM in this process can create a service provision atmosphere that honors women's life experience rather than condemns their actions. By having the opportunity to safely and nonjudgmentally discuss the range of emotions, events, and contributing factors surrounding her use of force, a woman has an opportunity to learn from her experiences and move toward a safer future.

Figure 1
Ecological Nested Model



Program Overview

JBWS is a multiservice domestic violence agency whose mission is the prevention of domestic violence through victim protection and empowerment, family member rehabilitation, and public education about domestic violence and its consequences. JBWS's VISTA Program began providing services in August 2002 to women who used coercion, control, force, and/or violence in their intimate relationships. VISTA's creation, implementation, and services are driven by the belief that women who use force against their intimate partners—be they domestic violence survivors or not—are putting themselves and others in their lives at greater risk of harm. To be eligible for services, a woman must have used non-self-defensive force in her intimate relationship with her current partner or former partner. Women who have used self-defensive force are referred to the agency's Community Counseling Program that serves domestic violence survivors.²

VISTA's primary intervention is curriculum-based, psychoeducational support groups.³ During the rolling admission, one-and-a-half-hour, 16-week support group, women learn about the dynamics of domestic violence as they gain knowledge and skills to facilitate safer lifestyles. The primary referral sources for VISTA include the criminal justice system, child protective services, community counseling programs, and self-referral. VISTA does accept women mandated by these institutions. Although

mandated services are not ideal for serving survivors of domestic violence (Osthoff, 2002), VISTA staff view mandated referrals as a part of the evolving process—rather than a final result—of this emerging service provision area.⁴

Method

Observations explored in this article pertain to the author's experience managing the VISTA Program and cofacilitating VISTA support groups and do not reflect on practice outside JBWS.⁵ Observations of 53 unduplicated female VISTA program members took place from August 2002 to August 2004. Of those observed, 52 were heterosexual, and one identified as lesbian, as indicated through self-report. Because only one lesbian woman was served, this article focuses on heterosexual women's experiences. Member ages ranged from 18 to 57. Group members' ethnic diversity—African American (1), Caucasian (38), Latina (12), and South Asian (1)—reflects the agency's service area. Of the women served, 17 identified as survivors of domestic violence in previous relationships, 12 identified as survivors in their current relationship, seven identified as survivors in their previous and current relationship, and 17 reported no history or current experience of domestic violence survivorship.

Of the women observed, three were women whose use of force was motivated by an imminent physical threat to their lives. Therefore, they were referred to the Community Counseling Program, and the courts were informed of the purpose of the referral. Nineteen of the women assessed stated that their use of force was motivated by previous years of abuse by their current or previous partner, but they believed there was not an imminent threat to their lives at the time of the incident. These women were considered survivors of domestic violence who began to retaliate, as they explained, by using their partner's "tactics against them." Eleven of the women assessed were survivors of abuse in a prior relationship(s) but did not use force in that relationship(s) and did not have the opportunity to address their victimization. These women are also considered survivors of domestic violence. Survivors referred for, or voluntarily enrolled in, services used force in the following ways: destroyed their partner's property, used a weapon when trying to prevent their partner from leaving during or after an argument, used a weapon to elicit a response from a partner whom they believed was ignoring them, stabbed their partner to gain control during an argument or as a response to a partner's threats to leave the relationship, and bit their partner in response to their partner's threat to leave the house. The eight women in VISTA referred to and voluntarily enrolled in the program report no previous history or current experience of domestic violence survivorship in their relationship. These women used force in the following ways: repeatedly broke restraining orders, destroyed their partner's property, threatened to kill their former partner because of child custody issues, and physically assaulted their partner.

The research method used was participant observation. Group members' feedback and limited statistical data were also gathered from weekly client feedback

forms, client satisfaction surveys, and annual program outcome measures. The limitations of this diverse method are the small sample size and anecdotal findings. The observations may be generalizable to the extent that providers are working with women who use force in a structured, support group program for those women. For the purpose of this article, the terms *women* and *group members* are used interchangeably to refer to the female VISTA support group members who are survivors of domestic violence who have used force against their intimate partners and women who are not survivors of domestic violence but have used force against their intimate partners. The term *partners* refers to the women's male partners. The terms *VISTA Program staff*, *VISTA staff member*, and *VISTA worker* are used interchangeably to refer to the VISTA program manager, VISTA counselors, trained VISTA volunteers, and VISTA student interns who work directly with the women.

Observations

Assessment: A Process of Understanding

Assessment is a complex, ongoing process in which the VISTA worker and the woman gradually work toward nonjudgmental understanding of the full range of the woman's life experience. The primary initial goal is to assess whether or not a woman is appropriate for VISTA services. If appropriate, then the secondary goal is to begin to understand the full context surrounding the woman's use of force to best serve her. VISTA Program assessment is a four-step process that begins when a woman makes her initial call for program services, continues with her individual intake assessment interview, evolves during her participation in the group, and ends with her final agency contact. This view of assessment—as an ongoing process—is critical to appropriately addressing a woman's use of force through contextualized education, support, and advocacy at the individual and exosystem levels.

During her initial call for services, a woman often expresses anger and disillusionment about her situation. Rather than immediately informing the woman of service goals and parameters, the VISTA worker's role is to listen. Simply listening often provides the woman an opportunity to fully express her feelings and, in return, have those feelings—and the source and extent of those feelings—validated by a professional. Since the chaos in her life began, this may be the woman's first experience having a professional listen first and ask questions later. This also sends her the message that the worker is meeting her where she is in her situation rather than imposing a framework on her. Generally, once an initial caller feels she is heard, her tone may begin to change, her anger may seem to deescalate, and she may then state her desire to receive information from the VISTA worker.

The VISTA individual intake assessment interview is the second portion of the total assessment picture. At this time, women are provided with a program overview

and then asked to complete paperwork that includes demographic information, medical history, and the Abusive Behavior Inventory (ABI). The use of language on all intake forms aids a woman's gradual understanding that the VISTA approach to her situation is usually unlike her experiences to date. For example, the terms *perpetrator* and *victim*, with which she may have become familiar through the criminal justice system, are replaced with *your information* and *partner/ex-partner information*. A woman often comments on "how much easier" it is to fill out a form when she does not feel "judged" before putting pen to paper. Filling out the final piece of paperwork, the ABI, is often a powerful portion of the intake meeting for her. This form is organized in a way that begins to contextualize her use of force. Next to categories and descriptions of force or violence, there are two columns. In one column, the woman checks off the behaviors she has used against her partner. In the column next to it, she checks off the behaviors her partner has used against her. On completing this form, she often finds her partner's behaviors exceed her own. The VISTA worker then asks the woman what motivated the behaviors she indicated on the ABI form. The discussion then facilitates understanding and often begins her identification of negative feelings, such as shame and anger. The prospective VISTA member often reveals she used force against her partner in retaliation for abuse she suffered long before the incident. In some cases, she explains, the abuse she suffered occurred in a previous relationship, where, for multiple reasons, she did not have the opportunity to explore its impact. She is then asked to fill out an additional ABI pertaining to the previous relationship. This provides her and the VISTA worker with a broader view of her life experience. Other times, she explains, her use of force was in direct response to her partner's abusive and/or controlling behaviors toward her. If she reveals that her use of force was out of physical self-defense, she is referred to the agency's Community Counseling Program on a voluntary basis. Some women, however, state that they are not survivors of domestic violence and that they believe their use of force is because of a "short fuse" or "hot temper."

Following a woman's paperwork completion, the VISTA worker learns more about the woman's situation by engaging in a conversation organized around a semistructured discussion format.⁶ Interwoven through this discussion is the VISTA worker's explanation of the possible impact the ENM's macro- and micro-level systems have had on the woman's life to date. The VISTA worker briefly discusses the gender-based messages many women receive about what is "appropriate female behavior" in a relationship. The woman will often respond by describing her frustration with expectations to be a "good girl," a "good wife," or a "good mother" in a relationship where she feels uncared for, disrespected, and unsupported. The VISTA worker then provides an overview of how these messages are especially counterproductive because they cast judgment without offering legitimate means of addressing one's anger.

During the individual intake interview, a woman usually takes full responsibility for her use of force, expresses her desire to change her behavior, and often reveals she called the police during the presenting incident. Similar to House's (2001) findings, all

VISTA members with histories of domestic violence survivorship immediately took responsibility for their use of force. Women who were not survivors of domestic violence generally admitted to use of force as well. Through this dialogue with the VISTA worker, the woman often begins to reveal possible early influences on her eventual use of force and the impact her use of force has had on multiple areas of her life. With the combination of questions asked and information provided, a woman often begins to make connections among what may have seemed like isolated incidents in her past, connections that begin to explain rather than demonize her actions.

The question that seems to elicit the most information regarding the women's use of force is, "What, if anything, was different about the presenting incident for you?" Some women have responded that the only thing different was that "this time the police came, so we got involved in the court system." In general, however, a woman responds that, although there was prior use of force between both parties, this incident was different because she felt a deeper level of disrespect from her partner than she had in the past. Perhaps her partner laughed at her, spat at her, criticized her mothering, or again refused to acknowledge her. One woman explained she used force because "he ignored me again, and this time I just didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed him and made him pay attention." VISTA Program staff observations are similar to Dasgupta's (1999) and House's (2001) findings that women have a variety of personal motives for violent behavior, including reclaiming lost self-respect, saving loved family members and pets, establishing self-identity as a tough woman, retaliating for a history of abuse, or taking preemptive measures because they believe an assault is imminent and/or because not using force in the past did not keep them safe.

Because assessment is a detailed process and because many women are, justifiably, self-protective during the individual intake assessment interview, women have been referred to the Community Counseling Program after completing the intake assessment and attending three or more group sessions. During group sessions, each woman revealed various scenarios that indicated her use of force was self-defensive. These actions include, for example, a woman scratching her partner while he was dragging her down the stairs by her hair, scratching her partner's face when he was trying to suffocate her, and living with a cycle of coercive control that has kept the woman fearful for her life should she not comply with her partner's every demand. It is interesting to note that although all of these women were told that they did not have to remain in VISTA and were free to attend voluntary groups, many chose to remain in VISTA because of the friendship bonds (Larance & Porter, 2004) they had formed with other members.

Education and Support: Context as a Tool

Education and support refers to the VISTA group process that integrates weekly session topics with one or more of the relevant ENM levels. By the cofacilitator's presenting session topics in this manner—one that resonates with VISTA members' experiences as members of society, participants in institutions, colleagues, and/or

family members—women are more receptive to learning the information and want to apply it to their daily lives. Each session follows a broad curriculum design that allows the cofacilitator to tailor the session to the needs of the women present at the time. The result of this approach is that women have the opportunity to gradually learn from, appreciate, and then honor their personal challenges as they concurrently gain knowledge from the curriculum topic and wisdom from the women in their group circle (Larance & Porter, 2004). The goals for this portion of the VISTA process—education and support—are to help women identify and then reduce the personal shame they may feel for having used force, address feelings of responsibility for having used force, and increase their awareness and use of nonforceful behaviors.

Shame and related feelings. Shame, when felt, can be a powerful and painful emotion for many women in VISTA. One woman described her feelings of shame as having “removed my breath. I can’t breathe right or look anyone in the eye anymore because I am so ashamed of what I did when I hit him. I feel debilitated.” Her feelings mirror Dasgupta’s (1999) findings that, although the women in her study felt justified for assaulting their partners, most still suffered guilt about their behavior. VISTA staff have observed how a woman’s understanding of the foundation of her shame—and possible anger—can liberate her by providing the space for her to move out of shame and toward responsibility. That understanding often begins during a particular VISTA session when women are asked to illustrate what shame means to them. Women have drawn court room scenes, a page of entirely black scribbles, a sad face with tears, a judge’s angry face, lightning bolts to denote fury, children looking on during a violent episode, self-portraits with fire in their eyes to suggest rage, or a simple crack across the page to denote a broken life.

After each woman shares her illustration and a brief description with the rest of the group, group members often comment on an obvious link between shame and anger that surfaced during individual explanations. The facilitator offers that this link may be better understood by revisiting the role the ENM macro-system level’s cultural and historical messages play in the formation of women’s perceptions of who they should be in a relationship and what happens when those perceptions are not realized. This process seems to generate shame from existing anger. For example, “Women have been led to believe that their life activities should be for others and that their main task is to make and maintain relationships—relationships that serve others” (J. B. Miller, 1991, p. 185). Thus, when a relationship falters, women often hold themselves ultimately responsible. The irony is that the relationship often falters because of women’s unaddressed anger about issues within the relationship, identified by some VISTA members as stemming from economic and social inequities between them and their partners. According to J. B. Miller (1991)

Repeated instances of suppressing the anger [in a relationship] can produce repeated experiences of frustration and inaction. The experiences of inaction and ineffectiveness

lead to feelings of weakness and lack of self-esteem, which can increase the woman's sense of feeling unworthy and inferior. Feeling more inferior and unworthy makes a person more angry. Such spiraling situations can come to fill so much of a woman's psychological "space" that she can begin to have a skewed sense of herself. She begins to feel "full of anger," which then surely seems irrational and unwarranted. All the while, this is really a false inner picture of her total psychological situation. But, very importantly, it is one that the external world—so called "reality"—is only too ready to confirm, because any anger is too much anger in women. (p. 185)

Many VISTA members address the irrationality and unwarranted feelings surrounding the anger that J. B. Miller describes, and they explain that this is what fills them with shame or the "unworthy and inferior" feelings to which J. B. Miller also refers. In turn, these VISTA members then describe feeling shameful for being angry. This vicious cycle

can end in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If the anger is finally expressed, it often appears in exaggerated form, perhaps along with screaming or yelling, or in ineffective form, with simultaneous negations and apologies, or with various other untoward accompaniments. (p. 185)

One VISTA member remarked that for 28 years of marriage she followed cultural, religious, and family expectations for her role as a wife and mother. "But then one day," she explained, "I had had enough of him and decided to fight back every opportunity he gave me. I pulled his hair, threw things at him, and really raised hell." Rather than feeling empowered by her use of force, she explained, she felt "less of a person every time" she reacted to "his irritating comments or actions." There does not seem to be positive resolution in using force, as she continued to explain that "fighting back hasn't helped me anymore than being passive did and now I feel worse about myself than I did before, so now what should I do?"

Other members disregard the suggestion that macro-level messages explain the shame and anger that resulted from their use of force. Instead, some of these women have explained that painful individual-level childhood experiences—such as unrevealed assault by a family friend or adoption as an adolescent in exchange for the family's economic well-being—initiated their lifelong tendency to confuse feeling ashamed with feeling angry. VISTA members who have the opportunity to deconstruct early childhood memories in light of their current incidents are often able to understand how unaddressed experiences, thoughts, and feelings motivate adult choices and encourage and/or increase shameful feelings for those choices. This realization gives women the opportunity to tap into existing strength by moving out of shame, beyond anger, and toward responsibility for acknowledging and then expressing their anger in a more appropriate manner. On her completion, the court-ordered woman whose description of shame introduced this section described VISTA as a "healing place" that provided her the opportunity to "journey out of shame and come to a place where that shame was no longer useful."

Responsibility. Responsibility, as generally defined by VISTA members in multiple group settings, is an internal feeling a woman has when she realizes she chose to use certain actions against her partner and then followed through with those actions without acting in physical self-defense. VISTA members are encouraged to name and then own their emotions, behaviors, and the actions that resulted from them. Because of women's socialization, addressing the concept of responsibility is a delicate process, especially with a group of women who may have been victimized and/or are currently in chaotic relationships. There is the risk that, if done in an inappropriate manner, encouraging responsibility will be translated by some women into reason to further shame themselves for their actions in an unworkable, chaotic, or even violent relationship. For example, a woman may express, "I know it's all my fault because I hit him!" rather than ask herself, "Why did I choose to retaliate?" and "What is happening in the relationship that makes me want to fight back?" Many VISTA members take responsibility for the entire incident, including responsibility for the role their partner played. This is certainly not VISTA's goal. But their tendency to do so is natural, the group facilitator explains, when considering the cultural and societal messages women receive about their relationship maintenance role. Having failed to maintain peace, these women often believe the incident and consequences are entirely their fault. For these women and other group members, group is an opportunity to reduce their burden by first honoring their ability to navigate and survive within the relationship and then, gradually, to identify the nature of their role in the altercation.

The benefit of encouraging responsibility—if done supportively, nonjudgmentally, and proactively—for the consequences of their use of force is that women can begin to feel less like passive, dependent agents and more like empowered (Gutierrez, 1990), skilled individuals able to navigate a relationship in a manner that serves them over the short and long term. Some women in VISTA blame their partners for "making them" use force. These women typically eschew identification with macro-level messages pertaining to a woman's role. Instead, they explain feeling enmeshed in the micro-system level or the daily interactions with their intimate partner that eventually and regularly lead to their use of force. One woman shared she flew into rages on finding that her husband loaded the dishwasher wrong or had not drained the children's bathwater. Her rages were, she explained, "his fault! If he wasn't so annoying I would not have to fight back." After multiple sessions and detailed exploration of her childhood, she revealed unresolved issues with her father, feeling disrespected and unheard throughout her childhood. She gradually connected the anger expressed toward her husband with the unresolved anger she felt toward her father but had never felt safe enough to express. Eventually understanding and then taking responsibility for her feelings and behaviors, she explained, helped her create a new life without using force.

Each VISTA member participates in a session that specifically encourages her exploration of the payoffs and costs, both short and long term, of having used force

in her relationship. For some women, this is the first step in critically and nonjudgmentally exploring their actions' consequences. VISTA staff have observed that women who use force who share the payoffs of their aggression in the company of other women who have used force feel validated because, in the words of one woman, "it reassured me that I wasn't crazy . . . They are good people and 'lost it' [too], so I know that I am still a good person." Often women laugh and share sighs of relief or knowing glances at hearing what others believe to have been beneficial about a behavioral choice that forever changed their lives. Short-term payoffs of using force have been described as: releasing years of anger all at once; giving him what was coming to him; feeling vindicated, better, strong, important, heard; finally "shocking the hell out of him"; and having "him finally listen to me." Similarly, long-term payoffs have been described as: "permanently turning the tables because now he never really knows what I'll do next"; "our relationship is better now because we both got help after hitting bottom"; "getting out of the relationship because I realized what it was doing to me"; and "coming to VISTA."

In contrast, VISTA staff have observed that women do not share laughter when describing the costs of having used force. But they do share audible sighs and knowing glances. Their lists of short- and long-term costs of having used force are intermingled and shorter than the benefits. But the costs seem to have penetrated their lives in a way the benefits did not. The costs women have shared include: exorbitant court or legal costs; having a record; sadness for "damaging" the family; and feeling shame, guilt, stigmatized, sad, self-disgust, that he won, it made everything worse, and more isolated. Through this exploration of payoffs and costs, women also participate in a parallel process of taking responsibility. One woman stated the payoffs "just didn't pay off because the rest was just so bad. If I could have just walked away, I could have saved myself so much heartache."

Increasing nonforceful behaviors. VISTA Program staff believe that any woman who is using non-self-defensive force in her intimate relationship is putting herself and those close to her at risk for further harm. But VISTA staff have observed that these women used force because they felt they lacked other options and a long-term view of what the impact of that use of force may be. This observation highlights Osthoff's (2002) point, "Practitioners need to give battered women the resources they need. . . . These resources may increase women's options. Perhaps with more options, women will be less likely to use violence" (p. 1537). Similar to Barnett, Lee, and Thelen's (1997) findings, VISTA Program staff have observed that VISTA members' (i.e., survivors and those without a domestic violence history) use of retaliatory force often escalates an already tense situation and makes the women more vulnerable to their partner's aggression. It does not seem to control or improve the immediate situation or the long-term relationship dynamic. Many women have shared that they used force because they felt they "didn't know what else to do." In one woman's words, "I had taken the emotional stuff for so long! I was really fed up

so I just exploded!" None of the women served in the VISTA Program believes her partner is afraid of her. In fact, most women report their partners "simply laugh" at them when they respond forcefully. All of the women also report they are not afraid of their partner's physical assaults but, in some cases, fear the power their partners may have to manipulate the legal system or the child protective services against the women's interests.

Before a woman can be receptive to learning more options, it is necessary for her to first explore the ENM's individual level, namely how conflict was addressed in her family of origin. For example, when she was angry as a child, was she sent to her room and told "not to come out until she was presentable," or was she provided the opportunity to articulate her feelings in a respectful manner? The first directive sends the message that she needs to keep her anger to herself, out of public view, and does not encourage introspection. In contrast, the second opportunity provides her a foundation for attaining tools that will enable her to gradually express herself in a constructive manner. Similarly, how did her caregivers express their anger toward each other? Did they yell and throw objects, or did they argue constructively and nonthreateningly with resolution? Without role models and skill-building experiences as children, women do not have a secure foundation for appropriately addressing anger, an emotion that seems to be universally condemned in women.

In the process of becoming receptive to and then incorporating alternative behaviors into their daily lives, each woman's analysis of her relationship's dynamics (the ENM's micro-system level) is critical because those dynamics may initially prevent her from considering alternative behaviors. For example, encouraging a woman to take a time-out when she feels the situation escalating may not be an option she is willing to consider because of the implied meaning a time-out may have in her particular situation. During their first few weeks in the program, many VISTA members share they would not want to take a time-out because they are sure it would signal to their partners that they are: "afraid of them now," "backing down," "want to lose this time," "not strong anymore," "just there to get kicked around," or "not equal in the relationship anymore."

From their first contact with the program, women are warned against drastically and instantly changing their behavior because of the relationship risk in which it may put them. By raising their consciousness about the current state of the relationship and balancing it with an awareness of how their particular situation would change should they suddenly change their behaviors, women are better able to protect themselves. This awareness becomes a part of each woman's safety plan. As their time in VISTA progresses, members have the opportunity to repeatedly question the payoffs and costs of maintaining existing relationship dynamics. In this process, the women brainstorm alternative behaviors they view as workable. The list includes: "journaling," "going shopping," "exercising," "leaving the house," "going to a friend's house," "calling the JBWS helpline," "going outside and screaming," "going for a long drive," "focusing on my actions rather than his actions," and "going for a walk."

Many women report that although taking a time-out took practice, it worked because it gave them the opportunity to “cool off” and not say and/or do something “in the moment” they would later regret. When women report taking a time-out or introducing an alternative behavior into their daily lives, it is not unusual to hear a round of applause from all present. For some, the use of structured sentences introduced in VISTA sessions—When you (name partner’s action), I feel (name own emotion); I would prefer (name a more respectful behavior)—gradually changes both how the women choose to respond and how their partners treat them. Some women have indicated that these structured sentences allow them to “own their feelings” while remaining respectful of their partners.

Advocacy

When battered women use violence, police, prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys all need to know more about the women’s experiences of battering. Without this information, none of these practitioners will be able to appropriately respond to the women who come before them. (Osthoff, 2002, p. 1534)

Toward this end, VISTA staff provide micro- and macro-level advocacy.

VISTA’s micro-level advocacy efforts include working directly with referring agencies and survivors when women who are referred for VISTA services are assessed to be survivors of domestic violence who responded in physical self-defense. Most women in this situation have been referred by the court after an inappropriate dual arrest, whereas others have been referred for making a statement to the prosecutor that the incident was mutual to protect their abusers. In this case, a VISTA staff member discusses the assessment outcome with the woman and explains that although VISTA contextualizes a woman’s use of force, because of her history and self-defensive actions, she would be better served in the agency’s Community Counseling Program. The VISTA Program manager then writes a detailed letter to the referring agency explaining the assessment outcome and recommending that the woman cease VISTA participation and voluntarily seek survivor’s counseling. These letters have been used by VISTA as tools for education and advocacy. By clearly explaining the program’s assessment to the court, VISTA staff are able to make recommendations for appropriate action. These letters have resulted in reduced or eliminated jail time, a woman’s participation in voluntary victim’s rather than VISTA services, and/or having charges dropped.

Micro-level advocacy efforts also extend to survivors who have been referred to VISTA for using non-self-defensive force. When these women complete the program, the VISTA Program manager discusses with them the possibility that they may benefit from voluntary survivor’s counseling. All of these women have shown interest. Contained in their completion letter to the referring agency—and first verified by the women—is a detailed history of their abuse by their partners or former

partners, an overview of VISTA participation, and the recommendation that they voluntarily seek survivor's counseling.

Macro-level VISTA advocacy includes local and state trainings. The VISTA Program staff provided one agency-based training for domestic violence program staff and community clinicians focused on lessons learned from VISTA members, provided portions of three NJCBW-based trainings, and provided one NJCBW conference presentation addressing women who use force. Those invited to both local and state-level trainings included police officers, private practitioners, advocates, child protective services workers, and members of the criminal justice system. VISTA staff learned that dialogue at this level is critical to educating others about the intricacies of each woman's experiences and how those experiences influenced her motivation and intent to use force against her partner. It is also critical for creating mutual understanding among those assisting women who use force. Question and answer sessions during and after these presentations have brought all involved a clearer understanding of the immediate and long-term needs of women who use force. Having the opportunity to answer a police officer's question, "Well, then what should I do at the scene of an incident?" or an attorney's inquiry, "What other questions can I ask her before trial?" is a pivotal experience for everyone involved and ultimately serves the best interests of the women who use force.

Conclusion

Appropriately serving women who use force seems to be a natural progression of the anti-domestic violence movement, one that espouses a general feminist ideal of women helping women regardless of their circumstances. Creating a safe place for women who use force—whether a separate program or the opportunity to address use of force in a survivors group setting—can be a critical part of extensive assessment, education and support, and advocacy that is essential to the lives of these women who find themselves without alternatives. Advocates and practitioners must continue to confront this difficult issue by broadening their understanding of the full context of women's use of force while concurrently exploring the most appropriate ways for their agencies to directly assist women who use force. Ideally, this approach will gradually provide a framework for serving women who use force in a manner they justly deserve.

Notes

1. Jersey Battered Women's Services's Abuse Ceases Today (ACT) Program serves men who are perpetrators and survivors of domestic violence. The difference in demand for ACT versus VISTA services is a reflection of the differences between men's and women's use of violence or force. For example, the ACT Program runs 11 groups a week for male batterers, with approximately 12 men per group. ACT

served more than 435 male batterers and two male victims in 2003. The VISTA Program, in contrast, has one woman who use force group a week that serves approximately five women at a time.

2. The Community Counseling Program is a nonresidential program that serves women in the community who have histories of domestic violence survivorship or are currently in abusive relationships.

3. VISTA's group topics address the dynamics of anger, communication skills, threatening and controlling behaviors, definitions of abuse, costs and benefits of using force and being violent, shame and responsibility, the progression of force, negative self-talk, time-outs, impact of force on family and friends, and spirituality.

4. For more information on a well-established program that also serves mandated women who have used force in intimate relationships—The CrossRoads Program—refer to the Duluth Abuse Intervention Project at www.duluth-model.org.

5. VISTA groups are led by an experienced, master's-level counselor and cofacilitated by a trained volunteer.

6. This semistructured format entails questions that address: the woman's family of origin, previous relationships, the status of her early relationship with her partner or ex-partner, details about the presenting incident, strengths of the relationship, whether or not she fears her partner or he fears her, how the presenting incident was different for her from other incidents, her current support system, and her goals for program participation.

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