

Facilitating Change: A Process of Renewal for Women Who Have Used Force in Their Intimate Heterosexual Relationships

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Abstract

The authors highlight a community's response to women's use of force, detail aspects of intervention strategies, and introduce a conceptual model representing the women's change process. In doing so, they encourage community partnerships, continued intervention innovation, and further research. Their observations suggest an intervention philosophy and approach that women have described as one of personal "renewal." The community's experiences are notable in light of national efforts to effectively meet the needs of female survivors of intimate partner violence who have used force.

Keywords

women who use force, intervention with women, intimate partner violence, domestic violence

Introduction

Theoretical, contextual analysis of battered women's use of force in their intimate heterosexual relationships is well documented in four special issues of *Violence Against Women*, published in 2002, 2003, and 2012. Underexplored, however, is the diversity of community and programmatic responses to this emerging issue. This practice note provides an overview of one community's approach, with particular focus on the Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence Through Education for Women (RENEW)

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Program at Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County. The purpose is to inform practitioners and researchers of promising intervention practices. By highlighting one community's experiences, detailing aspects of RENEW's intervention strategies, and introducing a conceptual model of the women's change process, the authors encourage community partnerships, continued intervention innovation, and rigorous empirical evaluation of such programs.

A Community's Course: Background

Washtenaw County's anti-domestic violence partners advocated for, and Ann Arbor City Council adopted, a Mandatory Arrest Ordinance in 1987. The ordinance required police to make arrests, under certain circumstances, in domestic violence cases (Ann Arbor, Michigan, Municipal Code § 9:68 [last visited January 7, 2014]). The ordinance was intended to implement a Duluth Program-inspired coordinated community response to domestic violence. Within 1 year of ordinance adoption, domestic violence arrests increased from 28 (1986) to 248 (1987) (S. McGee, personal communication, January 6, 2014). The City Council also created a multi-disciplinary Domestic Violence Coordinating Board composed of a domestic violence survivor, domestic violence shelter representative, batterer intervention program director, law enforcement officer, probation agent, and city prosecutor. The Board met monthly to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the Mandatory Arrest Ordinance.

An on-call team, staffed out of the Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House (now SafeHouse Center and hereinafter referred to as such), was established the same year (E. House, personal communication, January 5, 2014). The Team's goal was to provide immediate, in-person contact with survivors of domestic violence following law enforcement officers' action. The team provided in-person support and advocacy 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, following referrals from the 10 Washtenaw County-based law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement officers paged the team members after completing their domestic violence call investigation. In keeping with the original goals of the warrantless arrest laws enacted in the late 1980s, nearly all calls to the police, and resulting referrals to the on-call team, in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s involved males investigated and arrested for assaulting their female partners. However, in the mid- to late 1990s, trends emerged in Washtenaw County that reflected trends in communities across the United States. The number of women arrested for domestic violence involving their male partners and the number of dual arrests began to increase. When this increase occurred, the on-call team's goal was challenged because the identity of the domestic violence "survivor," within an advocacy definition of domestic abuse, was not necessarily the person the police identified as the victim. This was also further complicated when both parties were arrested.

The increase in women's arrest rates and in dual arrest rates was believed to reflect male batterers' increasing familiarity with both domestic violence laws and the police criteria governing domestic violence arrests. Batterers began to effectively manipulate law enforcement and their female partners, resulting in increasing dual arrests and women-only arrests by being the first to call the police, self-inflicting injuries, or

making sure they had visible injuries and their partners had none. SafeHouse Center advocates knew that the growing number of arrested women—both heterosexual and lesbian—demanded a nuanced approach. At one point, advocates learned that a battered woman had been arrested for protecting herself against the man who battered her by swinging a sand pail at him. Advocates responded by protesting in front of the Ann Arbor Police Department, holding sand pails, in an effort to bring public attention to the issue (S. McGee, personal communication, January 6, 2014).

SafeHouse Center advocates responded to the increase in women's arrests by creating advocacy and assessment guidelines (House, n.d.). The guidelines served as a local, and later national, framework for advocates addressing women's criminal legal involvement for their use of force. The assessment guidelines were critical in differentiating between legal and advocacy definitions of domestic violence (Burk, 2004). SafeHouse Center's advocacy was pivotal in drawing the courts' attention to the fact that cases involving women as domestic violence defendants were not and should not be treated equivalent to cases involving men who were arrested and charged with domestic violence (E. House, personal communication, January 5, 2014). Community partners were encouraged to make sure that conscious differentiations were made between the legal positions of "suspect/defendant" and "victim" when an arrest and/or domestic violence charge was brought, versus the position of "batterer" and "survivor" within the greater context of the relationship as a whole. The only way this could happen was to do a thorough assessment in every case. SafeHouse advocates provided the motivation for community partners to look more closely at what they were doing and why they were doing it.

Members of the criminal justice system struggled with the issue, given the belief system at the time that men and women must be treated equally to be treated fairly (E. P. Hines, personal communication, May 4, 2013). Probation agents and battered women's advocates were faced with difficult decisions. One probation agent responded by encouraging women convicted of domestic violence offenses to voluntarily seek SafeHouse Center counseling and support services. This move challenged SafeHouse Center advocates' commitment to survivor autonomy in making decisions related to engaging in services. SafeHouse staff struggled philosophically with receiving court-referred, violence-involved women for victim-focused counseling. Probation agents and judges needed a place to send women for intervention and support, but struggled with court ordering the women to do so. James Henderson, a former 15th District Court probation agent, explains, "Essentially telling the women to 'stay out of trouble' did not work because they didn't go for services, and so they had no support or help" (J. Henderson, personal communication, May 15, 2013). The result? According to Henderson, women in Washtenaw County were re-arrested on domestic violence charges at a higher rate than men who the court ordered to attend intervention services. Often the new assault charges were the result of women resisting the violence against them by preemptively using force, in an effort to gain some control over the battering they experienced (House, n.d.; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). These women now had multiple arrests—including felonies—and suffered all the consequences associated with being repeat offenders. It was evident that this approach was ineffective in addressing women's survivorship issues and had little or no effect in reducing their use of force.

For a brief period, women were also referred to an individual practitioner who provided gender-informed intervention, addressing a variety of the women's intersectional issues (Crenshaw, 1991; J. Henderson, personal communication, May 15, 2013). After the practitioner was no longer available, Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County established the Women's Alternatives to Domestic Aggression (W-ADA) Program in May 2006 (D. Garvin, personal communication, May 13, 2013). This program utilized a gender-neutral, batterer-specific model. Within a relatively short time, program administrators and members of the criminal legal system determined that W-ADA was ineffective. Many women refused to attend W-ADA group sessions, reoffended, or said they would rather go to jail than participate in W-ADA. Many explained that they could not identify with the content or approach of the W-ADA group sessions.

In August 2007, the RENEW Program was founded as the replacement for W-ADA. Gender-neutral, perpetrator-focused programming was shelved in favor of gender-responsive, trauma-informed (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004) support and intervention, firmly grounded in acknowledgment of the multiple structural inequalities confronted by women of diverse cultural and social contexts (Gilfus, 1999; Richie, 2000). During the transition, RENEW staff provided training—offered to all community partners by judicial invitation—that encouraged a contextual approach to understanding and addressing women's use of force. The training emphasized the critical need to explore the full context of women's experiences to sustainably and effectively intervene in their lives.

Since RENEW's founding, community partners have praised the program's results (E. Hines, personal communication, May 4, 2013). These include access to and completion of General Equivalency Development examinations, receipt of community college scholarships, improved understanding of courtroom procedures, and increased access to child care, housing, and legal aid. In addition, RENEW staff cultivated the relationship with SafeHouse Center that includes advocates' quarterly observation of RENEW group sessions and voluntary referral of RENEW participants to SafeHouse Center's support services. The community's course and lessons learned are notable in light of national efforts to effectively meet the needs of female survivors of intimate partner violence who have used non-self-defensive¹ force in their relationships.

RENEW Program: Overview

Fundamental to RENEW's approach is the awareness that women's use of force against their intimate male partners is gendered and, therefore, distinctly different—in terms of the motivation, intent, and impact—from the actions used by men who batter women (Anderson, 2009; Batterer Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan [BISC-MI], 2010; Dasgupta, 2002; Larance, 2006, 2007; Larance & Dasgupta, 2012; Miller, 2001, 2005; Miller, Gregory, & Iovanni, 2005; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006; Renzetti, 1999; Saunders, 1986; Stark, 2007). Grounded in this awareness, RENEW's group sessions provide women opportunities for personal “renewal”² through a variety of intervention strategies. Women gradually embrace the

intervention approach as they heal from past trauma while exploring choices that contribute to a vision of their future selves and violence-free lives.

Although some women self-refer, most enroll in RENEW after they are sentenced on domestic violence charges and, following the recommendation of probation, are ordered to attend by the judge. The women first call the program coordinator to schedule an intake assessment. They complete the intake, and then join one of two weekly open group sessions. The open groups provide intact group norms³ in which facilitators and veteran group members validate new members' feelings of anger and frustration. Established members explain and demonstrate to the new members, in the words of a veteran, "Don't worry, it won't always hurt this much . . . the pain is temporary" and "Here I learned it does get better." Through group sessions, previously isolated women are connected with each other and exposed to a range of shared resources (Larance & Porter, 2004). Resources exchanged and expanded include rides to group sessions, employment leads, improved access to transportation, additional child care, substance abuse recovery support, and formation of independent groups focused on exercise and child care. The hope that "things get better here because we can talk about everything" reinforces resource sharing among the women, which, in turn, builds and strengthens their social networks.

RENEW: Within the Circle

Each RENEW group session is member-led and marked by a ritual opening and closing. A group member opens the session as group leader by reading an inspirational poem or playing a song that has both personal meaning and is relevant to the session. The leader then lights a candle in remembrance of intimate partner violence survivors as well as women who have used force because they did not recognize an alternative course. The group leader proceeds by inviting members to "check-in." Check-in themes range from identifying an action and/or behavior used in the past week that reflects their personal integrity to describing a holiday challenge. Although women are typically court-referred to RENEW, little group session time is spent exploring referring incidents. Instead, group sessions focus on healing and personal growth through daily choices.

Following each woman's check-in, facilitators guide group session discussions by integrating topics from Vista (Larance, 2006; Larance, Hoffman-Ruzicka, & Shivas, 2009) and Meridians (Larance, Cape, & Garvin, 2012) curricula with common themes from the women's check-ins. The themes and member-initiated topics are woven together in a manner that is member- and group-centered rather than facilitator- and curriculum-driven. This approach is dependent upon the comfort and common experiences of group members. In the words of one RENEW member, "I wasn't gonna talk about [the abuse I suffer at home] but her story was just like mine so I decided to." Women often describe the group sessions as feeling more "like a conversation between friends than a class we have to go to." The role of RENEW facilitators is similar to that of model-setting group session participants (Yalom, 2005), as they reinforce the message that each woman "is her own best expert" in evaluating (Arnold & Ake, 2013) and developing viable alternatives to her use of force.

As group time comes to a close, facilitators and the group leader encourage a transition from the session's intimacy to the coming week's challenges and celebrations. The group leader then chooses another participant to lead the following week's session, and reads a ritual closing acknowledging the complexities of the women's use of force and life choices. The women collectively close group by standing in the circle and reciting a meditation.⁴

Method

Observations explored in this note pertain to the authors' experiences facilitating RENEW intervention and support groups. Between August 2007 and June 2013, a total of 239 unduplicated RENEW participants were observed. Observations took place while facilitating two weekly group sessions. The observations and direct statements made during group sessions were hand-recorded. Women's feedback provided during quarterly computer-based evaluations and final presentations (both oral and written) were used as supporting information. RENEW member ages at the time of service ranged from 18-66 years; the median age was 29 years. Group members' self-identified ethnic/racial identities included White (40.17%), Black/African American (30.54%), Other/Multi-Racial (1.67%), Middle Eastern (0.84%), Black/Caucasian (0.84%), Asian/White (0.42%), Asian (0.42%), Black African (0.42%), Native American (0.42%), and 1.67% also identified as Hispanic (from the White and Other/Multi-Racial groups). Almost one in four women (24.27%) did not report ethnic/racial identity. RENEW group members' annual income ranged from US\$0-US\$120,000; the median annual income was US\$32,000. Probation agents recommended and judges ordered more than 90% of RENEW participants to services. Because the majority self-identified as heterosexual, the focus of this note is on heterosexual relationship dynamics. The terms *group members*, *members*, and *women* are used interchangeably to refer to RENEW support and intervention program members. Although the majority of women in RENEW do not initially identify as survivors of intimate partner violence, the majority of the women observed describe a pattern of coercive control that often includes violence perpetrated against them by their former and/or current heterosexual partners. For the purpose of this note, the term *partners* refers to the women's male intimate partners.

This note from practice is based upon observations made while facilitating intervention program group sessions involving women from a metropolitan Midwestern community. Therefore, caution must be used in generalizing the findings beyond this setting. The note's purpose is to contribute to knowledge about an underexplored area of intervention. This note provides anecdotal information, often in the women's own words and from their perspectives. Therefore, objective, rigorous empirical evaluation of RENEW and similar programs is needed. Additional research on women's use of force, particularly among women with different cultural and geographic experiences, would contribute to a broader understanding of the complex nature of this population.

Observations

Power and Control Through Her Eyes

From a woman's first call for services through her final program contact, RENEW facilitators observe a clear distinction in women's narratives between their *wanting power*—by trying to access personal autonomy from a partner (use of force)—and *having power* through the exercise of personal authority over a partner (battering/coercive control). Women arrive at their intake with a keen understanding of how this “wanting versus having” distinction feels in their intimate relationships, but they often struggle to describe the power differential. Many women hesitate to disclose the magnitude of their domestic violence and/or sexual violence survivorship histories, which they describe as overshadowed by their use of force. Other women detail histories of abuse, but do not identify as either a “survivor” or a “victim.”

The differences between her seeking autonomy (her use of force) and his exercising authority (his battering/coercive control) are detailed in RENEW Program members' diverse descriptions of their partners' ongoing coercive control (Anderson, 2009; Stark, 2007). One woman's partner, for example, routinely demanded she wait to take a shower before he came home from work so he could smell her body and make sure she had not “been with” another man. Another woman's partner regularly insisted she wait to do the laundry until after he came home from work. When he came home, he would smell her underwear and make sure her “underwear doesn't smell like another man.” Many women detail their common struggle to make sense of these private actions, and describe them as gradually eroding their sense of self. The partners of women in RENEW demonstrated their use of coercive control by sabotaging the women's court-ordered participation. Some refused to give the women gas money to drive to group sessions. Others would leave the house without notice shortly before the group session, so the women were left without someone to care for their children. Similar to Roy's (2012) observations, partners of women in RENEW also attempt to manipulate the criminal legal system. Some male partners of RENEW participants threatened that if they did not buy and/or sell drugs for the men, they would call the women's probation agents and allege that the women physically assaulted them. RENEW participants reported that their male partners self-inflicted wounds and then contacted the women's probation agents claiming that the women had attacked them. Some ex-partners enlisted their current girlfriends to make false claims against the RENEW member, knowing the false claims would place the women in violation of probation. One man effectively used a woman's RENEW enrollment as “proof” that the woman was an unfit mother, providing a judge with “evidence” that resulted in her temporary loss of custody of their child. These examples highlight the complexity of the gendered nature of power and control experienced by RENEW participants, as well as potential collateral consequences of chosen interventions. The examples emphasize the need for nuanced intervention in which staff advocate for the women, while providing them tools to navigate survivorship histories and opportunities to explore alternatives to violence.

Acknowledgment: A Foundation for Healing

The Power and Control Wheel (Pence, n.d.) is a useful intervention tool because it explains the abuse of men who utilize coercive control and violence, while helping women acknowledge their domestic violence survivorship histories. Facilitators and veteran group members introduce the Wheel as a tool created by and for women who have been hurt by their male partners. Upon seeing the Wheel for the first time—and understanding that it was created by survivors—many women describe feeling a sense of relief.⁵ One participant remarked, “It feels so good to see what I’ve been through all down on paper.” Another noted, “It makes me know I am not crazy because I see it all here.” Many women embrace the Power and Control Wheel as a “touch-stone” in detailing that, although their use of force “turned the tables,” the shift was brief and primarily served to escalate the violence and/or coercive control used against them. New members then explain that if they used the behaviors noted on the Wheel, they did so to gain short-term control of the abuse they were experiencing.

Whereas the Power and Control Wheel provides women the opportunity to reflect upon their survivorship histories, the My House exercises (Larance et al., 2012) provide women the opportunity to explore how they experienced power and control as children (Family of Origin House), as adults (Intimate Relationship House), and to then consider how they envision healthy future relationships (Future House). In doing so, they gain an extended view of the role power and control has played in their lives and use this as the foundation to build future relationships. During these exercises, women are asked to illustrate what their family of origin and a recent intimate relationship “look like” in terms of who has the power and what it feels like to live in that “house.” They are then asked to illustrate what they want their future relationships to “look like.” Women have used a variety of symbols including a super-hero costume to identify a custodial grandparent and a thunderbolt to denote the atmosphere of chaos in their Family of Origin House, a shovel in the backyard to denote an abusive partner’s threats that he will kill her, flowers in the front yard to depict the joy of children in and around an Intimate Relationship House, and sunshine, an equality sign, and a vegetable garden to symbolize the equitable, nonviolent, and healthy relationship they hope for their Future Relationship House.

Women have shared that illustrating and presenting the three Houses provides the opportunity to identify and acknowledge a range of experiences and emotions including how anger was handled in their family of origin, possible sources of personal shame, why their childhood rape was never discussed or acknowledged by family, betrayal by alcoholic parents, loss of family status with a new sibling’s arrival, how they navigated the trauma of sexual abuse at an early age, the diversity of power holders in their lives, and how their definitions of personal strength and weakness have evolved. A gradual shift in self-awareness and perception is observed during this process. This shift is one from passive individual to whom things were done, to an active agent who makes decisions on her own behalf. For many women, this revised perception is challenging because, up to this point, they have often taken responsibility for everything that “went wrong” without recognizing the full range of their relationship dynamics. With a deeper understanding of the context of their actions, they are able to

honor themselves for navigating the chaos in their lives, and transition out of the shame and self-blame they feel for their use of force.

Language: Morality, Strategy, and Power

Women frequently describe how they have experienced power and control, or tried to utilize power and control, from the perspective of “morality”—what was “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong” about their choices. Commonly, women share feelings of shame, self-blame, and self-judgment for having used force. Although women may not use the specific terminology of “shame,” their detailed experience with this emotion is evident in their use of moralistic and judgmental language. The valuation implicit in this language reinforces the vicious cycle of, “I did bad things so I am a bad person.” For many women, this assessment-of-self seems paralytic. A useful tool in breaking this cycle and facilitating women’s expanding view of themselves and their options is giving women permission to briefly set aside the framework of morality (good vs. bad choices) and consider one of strategy (What would I like to see happen in this situation? What choices do I have to make this happen?). The framework shifts from (moral): “I should do _____ because _____ is the right thing to do,” to (strategic): “I will _____ because I want _____ to happen.”

This shift in language encourages critical thinking. It also helps women consider their actions from the perspective of accomplishing what seemed strategically appropriate at the moment of the incident, while reflecting upon the resources they saw themselves having at the time. Utilizing their expanding resources, group members and facilitators encourage women to take the next step by planning for how they want to respond in the future. For example,

I understand that I did what I did because I wanted to feel powerful in the midst of my abuse, so now I am ready to explore other actions/behaviors that contribute to my feeling more powerful while maintaining my personal integrity.

Facilitators encourage group members to share how they define power—what power “looks like” and what makes one “powerful.” They emphasize that power is inherently neither good nor bad. This is contrasted with the idea of weakness—what weakness “looks like” and the attributes of a weak person. Women often mention how their perceptions of power and weakness evolve through their time in RENEW. They recognize that they initially tried to use power, as they saw it and defined it at the time, to assert themselves and gain autonomy. What they ultimately work through in the group sessions is their definition of that power, what it looked like then, what it looks like now, and what they want it to look like in the future. Thus, their understanding, definition, and application of power evolve as they heal and move forward.

Critically important to the process of women’s evolving language and perception of self, is the language women use to describe their actions. Often, women’s sense of agency is unintentionally undermined by terminology that minimizes their choices. Terms used in group sessions that undermine the women’s efforts include “just,” “sort of,” “in a way,” “kind of,” “I think so,” “maybe,” and “I guess.” A woman who says, “I

just took some time to think before I responded” minimizes her actions. In opposition, a woman who says, “I took some time to think before I responded” is not minimizing. To remind women of the importance of their choices and the impact of language, facilitators and group members repeat minimizing words as soon as they are spoken. The woman who used a minimizing term is then encouraged to restate her example, but this time omitting the minimizing word. Done in a supportive, nonjudgmental environment, this collective experience—of being reminded and reminding others to take full credit—reinforces personal empowerment.

The Anger Umbrella: A Conceptual Model of Change

RENEW facilitators consistently identify a complex interplay of emotions by women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Many women initially state, “I’m angry!” A closer look at how the women describe that “anger” suggests multi-dimensional, multi-layered emotions that include shame, guilt, confusion, fear, sadness, grief/loss, betrayal by self and others, and forgiveness of self/forgiveness of others. The process of experiencing and exploring these feelings seems to lead to self-acceptance (Figure 1).

This is consistent with similar findings (Frasier, Slatt, Kowlowitz, & Glowa, 2001; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994). Understanding the evolution of these emotions is a critical aspect of effective intervention with women who have used force.

Women’s anger may be quietly and assertively stated as, “I’m happy and glad I did it and I hope I hurt him.” It may also be emphatically and loudly stated as, “This isn’t me! I can’t believe I am here.” For many women, “anger” centers on the injustice of their arrest after years of abuse by their partner. Other reasons for their anger include their partners’ affairs with other women, taking full responsibility at arrest while their abusive partners denied initiating the violence, not understanding that pleading “no contest” meant admission of guilt and multiple collateral consequences, losing their jobs because of domestic violence charges, inability to secure jobs due to the domestic violence charges, child protective services’ involvement in the family’s life, intimate partners’ sexual assault of their children, and women’s court order to attend RENEW. Their self-identified anger is validated and described by facilitators and veteran group members as a normal, healthy emotion. In the words of one RENEW member, it is like an “umbrella” because “it covers up everything under it and protects you from everything else.” Unraveling and understanding the complexity of the anger is the focus of much of women’s time in the program.

Once women form connections with other members and identify with the group sessions’ safety and ritual, their anger seems to subside and become more malleable. Women who identify feeling shame often state they feel immobilized by a hatred for themselves rather than the actions they used. This shame impedes their transition to guilt for multiple group sessions. The shame is an expression of self-hatred, whereas the guilt is a dislike of their actions. Their intractable “shame” may be a result of feeling stigmatized for being identified as “bad” by their arrest (Dichter, 2013) and then struggling to reconcile that stigma with their self-identity.

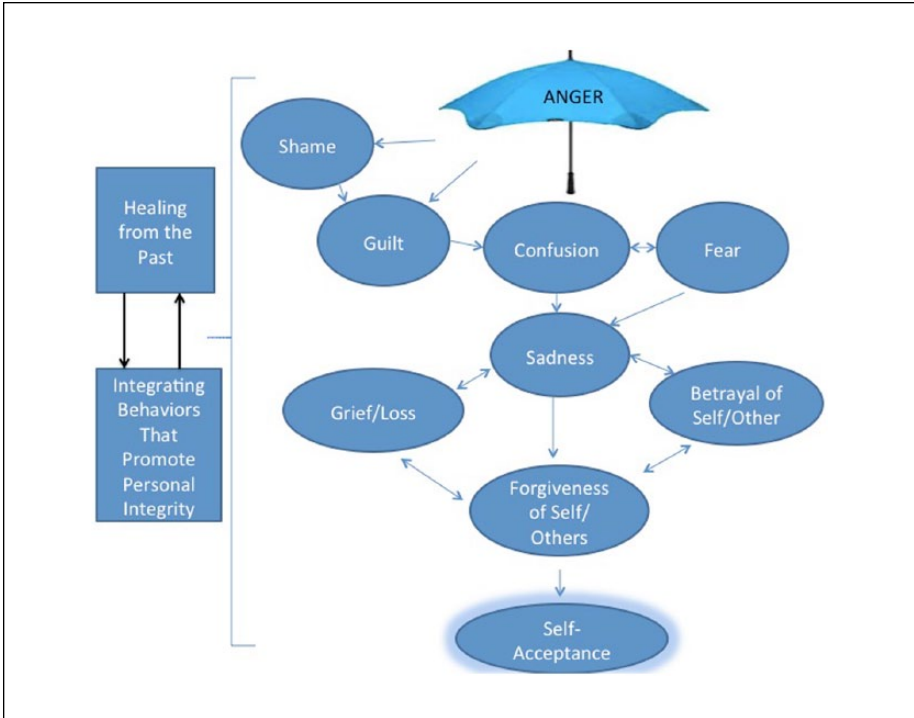


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Change Process.

Other women initially identify feeling guilty, but not shameful, and use the guilt as an avenue to discuss their sadness. They self-identify as sad for “everything that has gone wrong.” Some women state feeling fearful, not for their physical safety, but for “how he can continue to manipulate the [criminal legal] system against me” and “do things that other people don’t get,” like orchestrating her loss of the physical and/or legal custody of their children, gaining sole access to her home, severing connections with her family members, or undermining her stable employment. The fear seems to be experienced as a “give and take” with feelings of confusion. The confusion has been articulated as, “Well, he said I have an anger problem so maybe I am the ‘batterer’?” and “What if I am really crazy like he says I am?” One woman explained this confusion as, “He put me in jail, then had me hospitalized for being crazy, so now I guess the grave is next. I don’t know what to do.”

Discussing the confusion and fear seems to provide many women the opportunity to more deeply explore their sadness. They report feeling sad because their children witnessed their arrest or because they realize they “cannot hold up a sinking ship” on their own. One woman described this emotion as feeling sad and exhausted because she could not “keep [her] marriage afloat.” By holding her forearm in the air at an angle she explained, “My marriage looks like a sinking ship. I know it can’t last that way but all I can do now is try to keep it floating in the water.” This woman explained that she was, at once, sad and grieving. For her, it was the death of a dream.

The women's expressions of sadness seem delicately balanced with feelings of betrayal and grief. For some women this means they feel betrayed by their partners, others feel they betrayed themselves, whereas many women state feeling both. The feelings of grief and loss center upon "the death" of their relationship and lost hope for the future. Women describe the grief as "complete emptiness." Exploring betrayal and grief often gives way to a group member-generated discussion of forgiveness. Many women spontaneously suggest that perhaps forgiving their partner for his actions used against them is what the women feel they need to do before they can "truly heal." Further exploration of this emotion often leads women to the conclusion that they actually need and/or want to forgive themselves for a range of issues including "believing things had changed at the okeydokey,"⁶ "wasting years of my life trying to save him," "staying longer than I should have," "staying because of the kids," "getting taken again," "forgetting who I am," "trusting him again and again," "feeling disrespected but still staying," and "becoming just like him because I used violence." Given the group composition and setting, women articulating this need and desire for self-forgiveness may be culturally and geographically specific and deserves more attention in future work.

It is important to note that RENEW group sessions take place within a Euro-American/Judeo-Christian cultural framework. Given the diversity of group membership and the individual nature of healing and change, it is understandable that not all women identify with each emotion and some state feeling certain emotions more intensely than others. For example, a West African woman did not identify with a desire to seek or receive forgiveness for using force against her husband, whereas African American and Caucasian women in her group sessions spoke of the concept of forgiveness, of self and others, as playing a large role in what they referred to as their healing. Although the West African woman did not identify with the predominant feelings expressed during particular group sessions—denoting the uniqueness of each woman's lived experience (Richie, 2000) and the importance of culture in shaping those experiences (Bui & Morash, 1999; Dasgupta, 2002; Yoshihama, 1999)—the women provided her the space to safely and non-judgmentally explore her point of view.

Having explored forgiveness, both for themselves and their partners, many women seem to gradually gain self-acceptance. One woman summarized her feelings as, "OK, so I did something wrong. I felt bad about it. I have taken responsibility. 'Live and learn.' It's time to move on." For some women, self-acceptance comes in the form of externalizing their experiences and, for others, attributing their actions to an alternative persona. Laura reflected, "I was a different person when I came here." Nikki reported that she stabbed her partner and "got myself into this mess for all that" because of "that other woman I become when things go too far."

Implications for Practice

RENEW Program participation provides women who have used force in their relationships the opportunity to heal from past trauma while focusing on daily choices that

promote who they want to be and how they want to live. Fundamental to RENEW's approach is the awareness that women's use of force is distinctly different from the actions used by men who batter women and, therefore, demands tailored, gender-responsive intervention. RENEW's intervention approach deserves greater attention due to its observed ability to reach an underserved population: women who detail survivorship histories but many of whom do not self-identify as domestic violence victims or survivors and, therefore, do not seek services through traditional domestic violence survivor support agencies. The change process introduced in this note has multiple implications for professionals involved in the women's lives. For example, by understanding that the women's anger is concealing their vulnerability, perhaps first responders and service providers will be better informed regarding effective communication strategies with the women. Further implications are likely to be revealed through the conceptual model's use. In particular, its application will be informed by exploring its relevance to other geographical areas and with women from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

RENEW's intervention and advocacy efforts are enhanced by community partnerships. These partnerships, evident in a variety of situations, nurture sustainable change at the systems level. A critical aspect of such partnerships is education. Formal training offered by RENEW staff to judges, advocates, probation agents, law enforcement officers, prosecuting attorneys, and public defenders was critical to a shift in thinking about and addressing women's use of force. The training, offered by judicial invitation, seemed to have a ripple effect across the community. Judges and probation agents listened to the case studies, discussed themes they too had observed, and decided to revisit cases. In one instance, a woman's terms of probation were significantly reduced. Over time, community partners have also witnessed obvious changes in women who complete RENEW. Anecdotally, the Honorable Elizabeth P. Hines, 15th District Court Chief Judge, who presides over a domestic violence docket, states if women complete RENEW, "I know they will get help, they will get all sorts of support, and I know I will not see them again [in the courtroom]" (E. Hines, personal communication, January 7, 2014). For example, one woman who had chosen jail in lieu of continuing to attend W-ADA reoffended. She was then court-ordered to complete RENEW. She completed the program and received staff support in obtaining a full scholarship to college. In addition, David Oblak, a 15th District Court probation agent, notes that women who have completed RENEW have not reoffended as measured by reports to the court (D. Oblak, personal communication, January 7, 2014).

These formal partnerships are evident during a range of events such as monthly county domestic violence task force meetings, bi-annual BISC-MI (2010) conferences, and Center for Court Innovation Ann Arbor Open Houses. The informal nature of these trustful community relationships is a fundamental component of "what makes things work" in advocacy efforts for the women (Putnam, 2000). For example, trust cultivated between a police detective and a RENEW staff person have enabled multiple late night cell phone calls. The officer has reached out to RENEW staff on the scene when, "It looks like she is the perpetrator but I think I may be missing something." Similarly, probation agents' gender-responsive approach to their work (Morash,

2010), and regular communication with RENEW staff, enable information sharing in a manner which circumvents unintentional collusion with the true batterer, promotes women's autonomy, and addresses women's diverse needs. Likewise, RENEW staff's bi-annual SafeHouse Center volunteer trainings on women's use of force contribute to a community knowledge base about the issue. They also send a powerful message about community-based alliances in addressing this shared challenge. Effectively facilitating change, through intervention and advocacy for women who have used force, demands a community's commitment on multiple levels. This community's evolving approach suggests that education, partnership, and gender-responsive intervention are central to this ongoing effort.

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Notes

1. This is "non-self-defensive" as it does not meet the legal definition. However, many women describe their use of force as "self-defense" meant to protect the essence of who they are but do not feel in imminent physical danger. Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence Through Education for Women (RENEW) staff refer to this as "defense of self."
2. One of the first program participants in 2007 used the term *renewal* to describe how she felt while attending group sessions. Thus, the program was named RENEW.
3. According to Yalom (2005), in every group a set of unwritten rules or norms evolve that determine the group's procedure.
4. RENEW Program completion includes 30 contacts and the final presentation.
5. Because the Wheel illustrates power and control dynamics utilized by abusive men against women in intimate heterosexual relationships, the Wheel should not be used to detail women's forceful actions. Instead, there is a need for an alternative visual tool, which contextually depicts women's use of force as informed by their survivorship histories.
6. The term *okeydokey* is used by the women in reference to their partners. One woman's "okeydokey" begged her to return, assuring her "things were better now" and that "he had changed." After returning she found, instead, that nothing had changed.

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