

The Perceptual System of Men Who Batter

Because of the distorted perceptions that the abuser has of rights and responsibilities in relationships, he considers himself to be the victim. Acts of self-defense on the part of the battered woman or the children, or efforts they make to stand up for their rights, he defines as aggression *against* him. He is often highly skilled at twisting his descriptions of events to create the convincing impression that he has been victimized. He thus accumulates grievances over the course of the relationship to the same extent that the victim does, which can lead professionals to decide that the members of the couple "abuse each other" and that the relationship has been "mutually hurtful."

Although a percentage of batterers have psychological problems, the majority do not. They are often thought to have low self-esteem, high insecurity, dependent personalities, or other results from childhood wounds, but in fact batterers are a cross-section of the population with respect to their emotional make-up. Certain labels such as "control freak" or "self-centered" have the appearance of accuracy, but even these overlook the fact that the battering problem is very context-specific; in other words, most batterers do not have an inordinate need for control, but rather feel an inordinate right to control under family and partnership circumstances. Thus unlike other problems with violence, battering behavior is mostly driven by culture rather than by individual psychology. Many batterers are "in touch with" their feelings and skilled in the language of therapy and recovery, which throws evaluators off the track. They may use their childhoods and emotions as an excuse, to divert attention from their entitled and possessive attitudes.

Battering is a learned behavior, with its roots in attitudes and belief-systems that are reinforced by the batterer's social world. The problem is specifically linked to how the abuser formulates the concepts of *relationship* and *family*; in other words, within those realms he believes in his right to have his needs come first, and to be in control of the conduct (and often even of the feelings) of others. A recent research study showed that two factors, the belief that battering is justified and the presence of peers who support abusiveness, are the single greatest predictors of which men will batter; these two had a considerably greater impact than whether or not the man was exposed to domestic violence as a child (Silverman and Williamson).

Each batterer has his own mix of controlling and entitlement. Some monitor every move their partners make like a prison guard, but at the same time are somewhat lower in entitlement, contributing more to housework and childcare than other batterers (though still less than non-batterers). Other batterers don't control their partners freedom as severely, but become irate or violent when they are not fully catered to, or when victims remind them of responsibilities that they are shirking. The levels of manipulateness and overt disrespect also vary, so that each batterer has a particular style.

Because batterers are typically charming and persuasive, and are often kind and attentive early in relationships, he does not necessarily need to seek out a special kind of woman to victimize. Efforts to find common ground among battered women from the point of view of background or personality type have been largely unsuccessful (Hotelling and Sugarman), just as they have been with batterers. Service providers who assume that the victim must have had pre-existing problems of her own can make counterproductive interventions, as pathologizing of the victim can lead to re-injury.

BATTERERS' STYLE DURING SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

An abuser's desire for control often intensifies as he senses the relationship slipping away from him. He tends to focus on the debt he feels his victim owes him, and his outrage at her growing independence. (This dynamic is often misread as evidence that batterers have an inordinate "fear of abandonment.") He

is likely to increase his level of intimidation and manipulation at this point; he may, for example, promise to change while simultaneously frightening his victim, including using threats to take custody of the children legally or by kidnapping.

Those abusers who accept the end of the relationship can still be dangerous to their victims and children, because of their determination to maintain control over their children and to punish their victims for perceived transgressions. They are also, as we will see later, much more likely than non-batterers to be abusive physically, sexually, and psychologically to their children.

The propensity of a batterer to see his partner as a personal possession commonly extends to his children, helping to explain the overlap between battering and child abuse. He tends, for example, to have an exaggerated reaction when his ex-partner begins a new relationship, refusing to accept that a new man is going to develop a bond with "his" children; this theme is a common one in batterer groups. He may threaten or attack the new partner, make unfounded accusations that the new partner is abusing the children, cut off child support, or file abruptly for custody in order to protect his sole province over his children.

Batterers' Advantages in Custody Disputes

A batterer who does file for custody will frequently win, as he has numerous advantages over his partner in custody litigation. These include, 1) his typical ability to afford better representation (often while simultaneously insisting that he has no money with which to pay child support), 2) his marked advantage over his victim in psychological testing, since she is the one who has been traumatized by the abuse, 3) his ability to manipulate custody evaluators to be sympathetic to him, and 4) his ability to manipulate and intimidate the children regarding their statements to the custody evaluator. There is also evidence that gender bias in family courts works to the batterer's advantage. (Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Gender Bias Study) Even if the batterer does not win custody, his attempt can be among the most intimidating acts possible from the victim's perspective, and can lead to financial ruin for her and her children.

After a break-up, the abuser sometimes becomes quickly involved with a new partner whom he treats relatively well. Abusers are not out of control, and therefore can be on "good" behavior for extended periods of time - even a year or two - if they consider it in their best interest to do so. The new partner may insist, based on her experience with him, that the man is wonderful to her, and that any problems reported from the previous relationship must have been fabricated, or must result from bad relationship dynamics for which the two parents are mutually responsible. The abuser can thus use his new partner to create the impression that he is not a risk.

Creation of a Positive Public Image

An abuser focuses on being charming and persuasive during a custody dispute, with an effect that can be highly misleading to Guardians ad Litem, court mediators, judges, police officers, therapists, family members, and friends. He can be skilled at discussing his hurt feelings and at characterizing the relationship as mutually destructive. He will often admit to some milder acts of violence, such as shoving or throwing things, in order to increase his own credibility and create the impression that the victim is exaggerating. He may discuss errors he has made in the past and emphasize the efforts he is making to change, in order to make his partner seem vindictive and unwilling to let go of the past.

Harassment and Intimidation Tactics

Where manipulation and charm do not work, the abuser may switch to intimidation, threatening or attacking those whom he perceives as being supportive to his partner. In the most extreme cases the abuser may attempt to kill the woman, her lawyer, or the children, and sometimes will succeed. In some cases custody evaluators have been afraid to release their recommendations because of their fear of the batterer's retaliation.

Batterers may continue their harassment of the victim for years, through legal channels and other means, causing periodic re-traumatizing of the victim and children and destroying the family's financial position. Motions by abusers for custody or for increases in visitation are common forms of retaliation for things that he is angry about. (They are also used to confuse the court; for example, lawyers who represent abusers encourage clients who are accused of sexual abuse to file for custody immediately; this move will cause the court to treat the allegation as "occurring in the context of a custody dispute.") If the abuser meets with periodic success in court, he may continue his pattern of abuse through the legal system until the children reach majority.