

Reflection

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This study of shelter outcome grew out of a larger research project on the help-seeking of battered women in Texas shelters. Ellen Fisher of the Texas Council of Family Violence initiated the project. Texas shelters had been collecting standardized data from battered women entering their 51 shelters. In the process, they had amassed an exceptional database on battered women—one of the largest at the time. Ellen saw a great opportunity to substantiate some of the characteristics of women entering the shelters and document the initial shelter outcomes. At the time of the study in the mid-1980s, few shelter studies had been published, and those studies focused on a single shelter with a narrow set of variables.

Given the suspicions of research and researchers at the time, and the uncertain results and information, Ellen and her co-workers were taking a risk in releasing the data and supporting its analysis. The opportunity and success of the research, eventually summarized in the book *Battered Women as Survivors* (Sage, 1988), grew from a trusting collaborative relationship between Ellen and me. There was a lot of talking and listening and some mutual experience in each other's world. I had been involved in shelter work and batterer counseling work previously, and Ellen had exposure to research in her graduate study and as a former employee of the Texas Department of Human Services.

We were especially eager to explore the reasons for shelter outcome. One of the main objectives of the shelters was to help move battered women away from dangerous men. The principal discharge question was, therefore, whether a woman was planning to return to her partner on leaving the shelter. Nearly a quarter of the Texas shelter women professed that they did. We attempted to explain the outcome in terms of economic dependency or resource theory. This sort of explanation was basic to the advocacy viewpoint that prevailed at most of the shelters. As shelter staff were able to help battered women gain more resources and support, the women were more likely to be "empowered" to leave an abusive and violent relationship behind. The resource-related variables, such as "own transportation," "child care," and "own income," were significantly associated with not returning to one's partner. The one surprise was finding the strong influence of "the batterer being in counseling" on returning to the partner.

This latter finding has been widely cited as a caution against batterer counseling and even objection to it. The implication is that batterer counseling may help men to lure their partners back to continue their abuse. This concern is, of course, a legitimate one as we discuss in the article. It is especially of note given the optimistic view of battered women that their partners will complete batterer counseling to which they are court-ordered. Our recent multi-site study of batterer programs found that 90 percent of the women thought their batterers would complete the counseling, whereas the completion rate was closer to 65 percent (see *Batterer Intervention Systems*, Sage, 2002). The Texas women admittedly may have been over-estimating more the court's power to keep men in counseling than the men's willingness to participate.

At the same time, there are naturally some limitations to the “batterer counseling” finding. The finding applies only to the small percentage of the batterers of shelter women actually in batterer counseling, and not necessarily battered women in general. In our multi-site study of batterer programs, only a small portion (7 percent) of the partners of batterer program participants had previously been in shelters or was currently in them. Nearly half of the women were not living with their partners and the contact with partners varied over time. In other words, “returning to the partner” was not a fixed outcome but evolved and changed with a number of circumstances.

The most striking, and somewhat reassuring, in our multi-site evaluation was that the vast majority of the women with batterer program participants felt safe, and this perception was highly correlated with the batterer’s behavior. The judgment of most of the women appeared, in other words, to be well-grounded. Moreover, the majority of men did eventually stop their physical violence and lower other forms of abuse during the four-year follow-up. It could be, therefore, that some of the shelter women returning to their partners in counseling will experience “safety.” In the Texas study, they may have been less severe cases to begin with.

The greatest contribution of the article may be its early consideration of women’s decision-making and exposing the impact of resource and service circumstances on that process. The foundations for a rationale adaptation were documented in the Texas study. There has been increasing attention to how women make decisions about safety and help-seeking in the subsequent work of Cris Sullivan, Jackie Campbell, Mary Ann Dutton, and Lisa Goodman; their findings seem to reinforce the importance of advocacy and emotional support. As we argued in a recent study on women’s perceptions from our multi-site evaluation, we need to go deeper and further on how women make informed decisions, and how especially to help some avoid making dangerous ones.