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Exploring the Communication of Men Revealing Abuse from Female Romantic Partners

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Relational violence has been studied in a variety of interpersonal contexts, but spousal abuse is typically viewed from a female-victim perspective. Indeed, the terms *wife abuse*, *spouse abuse*, and *marital violence* are often interchanged for the term *family violence* (Dutton, 2006). Women's victimization has necessarily garnered attention in the arenas of research and intervention (Campbell et al., 2003; Walker, 2000), but far less research has been devoted to the male-victim perspective. Further, clinical application of the research on men's victimization is virtually nonexistent, particularly in the field of communication research. The victimization of men by female partners is typically reported as a byproduct of studies examining female victims and may be ignored for a variety of reasons, including methodological and political goals (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989; Straus, 2005). With this in mind, the current chapter adds to the comparatively small body of work by exploring the area of abused men.

Certainly, violence perpetrated by women may consist of a variety of behaviors. Women may be retaliating in self-defense (e.g., man hits woman, so woman hits man back). Women may also overreciprocate the violence perpetrated against them (e.g., man slaps woman, so woman stabs or shoots man). These types of violent behavior perpetrated by women are distinct from abuse solely initiated by women with intent to control or dominate their partners. It is this latter type of violence (*intimate terrorism*,

as characterized by Johnson, 1995) that was examined in the reports of men in this chapter. Although controversial for reasons of measurement, politics, and government funding, the finding that women initiate and perpetrate partner violence as often as or more often than men has been documented in numerous studies (Katz, Washington-Kuffel, & Coblentz, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995 to name a few; Fiebert, 2006 provides an extensive overview of studies with similar results). This finding is not an attempt to prove outcomes of violence against men are always equal to outcomes of violence against women, but it does bring to the forefront the fact that men are indeed victims of female-initiated abuse.

A strong connection exists between abuse victimization and negative health outcomes. Physical and psychological violence may result in diminished physical well-being (Campbell, 2002), mental health (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001), or both (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997). For men abused by female partners, derogatory social consequences to their victimization may intensify negative physical and mental health outcomes. The destructive reactions men receive when disclosing their abuse and the lack of assistance from typically supportive sources may be detrimental not only to their interpersonal well-being but to their overall health as well. It thus becomes important to assess the experiences of abused men. Further examination of the characteristics surrounding the disclosure and social interactions of men abused by female partners may shed light on how to help these victims.

Abusive behavior may occur as a result of escalating and/or cyclical interactions (Walker, 2000). Cahn (1996) claimed that identifiable and predictable interaction patterns underlie abusive events. Whatever the root of abuse, the communicative aspects of this phenomenon are inherently involved in its occurrence—both from a disclosure perspective (to outsiders) and from the perceptual interpretations of the abused men themselves. Published analyses of the *experiences* of abused men are scarce in academia, particularly within the field of communication. Nonacademic anecdotes often provide the sole outlet for these men's voices (George, 2003). With that in mind, the study presented in this chapter sought to remedy the paucity of information by examining the communicative characteristics surrounding men's victimization.

There is evidence that intimate violence against men exists (Fiebert, 2006). Additionally, there are reasons to believe that this violence is underreported, as will be shown. Therefore, by drawing from the established theoretical backgrounds on masculinity, abuse, and stigmatized identities, the overarching goal of this research was to examine the communicative characteristics of disclosure from men abused by female, romantic partners. This chapter commences by first briefly presenting

the history of research on this type of abuse (more thorough histories can be found by George, 2002, 2003; Migliaccio, 2001). Theoretical explanations for a lack of societal acknowledgment are also explored by revealing qualitative trends from a study of the disclosive practices of battered men. This is followed by direct application of the results to the daily, lived experiences of these men.

History and Culture

Violence perpetrated by and against men and women may possess commonalities, but the historical and cultural implications of abused men may make their abuse—and perhaps the disclosure of that abuse—an entirely different issue.

Abuse victims need—for psychological, physical, and emotional reasons—to be able to disclose their abuse (Levendosky et al., 2004). Thus, it is important to study the characteristics surrounding the social interactions abused men experience when disclosing the existence of their abuse and to compare those actual practices to current theories of communication stigma and disclosure. Psychological distress has been reported from men receiving emotional and physical abuse in their heterosexual dating relationships (Simonelli & Ingram, 1998). One would imagine men would want to alleviate this distress through disclosure or support-seeking behaviors. But the forces causing men to be silenced may outweigh the negative impacts of hiding the abuse. In addition to the fact that there are very few organizations to help abused men, there may be additional, culturally ingrained reasons for not seeking support. A thorough understanding of this phenomenon is informed by cultural norms, the communication barriers of masculinity and stigma, and privacy management and face considerations. One cannot ignore the fact that the violence committed by women against men in personal relationships may be historically and culturally situated (see George, 2002).

Cultural Influence

The fact exists that underreporting of abuse, by both sexes, does occur (Sarantakos, 1999). Historically, men abused by their female partners were ostracized and often physically expelled from their communities (George, 2003). In Western society today, cultural justifications may still influence the disclosure practices of men abused by women. For example, men who are the victims of partner violence often view abusive behavior as expected (Margolin, 1987) and may be generally more

reluctant to acknowledge *abuse* from their partners than are female victims (McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987). Often, battered men are judged under the assumption that they should stay with their abusive partner (Harris & Cook, 1994). Men may thus avoid disclosing their abuse because of their commitment to marriage (Lupri, 1990), sincere apologies by their partner after the abuse, psychological dependency within the relationship (Pagelow, 1984), monetary responsibility for leaving, maintenance of child custody and protection (Eckstein, 2007; Steinmetz, 1977–78), negative responses from officials when attempting to file complaints (Langley & Levy, 1977), and disclosure of the abuse producing social embarrassment (Flynn, 1990).

Abused men may excuse their aggressors, and that justification may be reinforced at a societal level, particularly when the aggressor is a woman (Lloyd & Emery, 2000). Blaming the male victim for his abuse is likely, as men are perceived as having the ability to defend themselves (Carney, Buttell, & Dutton, 2007). Men failing to uphold traditional conceptualizations of masculinity are designated to inferior positions in society; this designation may result in limited provision of support and health resources (Courtenay, 2000; Migliaccio, 2001). As a result, the reasons men do not enact communicative practices to aid in their abuse recovery must be explored.

Practical Barriers to Communication Surrounding Abuse

Members of stigmatized groups, as abused men are argued to be, “develop shared understandings of the dominant view of their stigmatized status in society” based on “prior experiences” and “exposure to the dominant culture” (Major & O’Brien, 2005, p. 399). Thus, men abused by female partners may understand their victimization in terms of cultural norms of masculinity and stigma.

Masculinity

One factor not typically associated with abused women is the culturally ingrained aspect of masculinity, often defined by its opposite; a man is not a woman (Doyle, 1995; Kimmel, 1996). Western culture constructs masculinity as directly contrasted with femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The historical relationship between the sexes may define current-day roles. Masculinity may be comprised of stoicism, independence, and expected dominance over others (Migliaccio, 2001). Going outside this expectation “has a more negative cultural meaning for men than it has for women—which means, in turn, that male gender-bound-

ary-crossers are much more culturally stigmatized than female-boundary-crossers” (Bem, 1993, pp. 149–50). Conceptualized in this fashion, masculinity may enforce barriers for men seeking to disclose their abuse. If individuals who disclose to others have reported greater health, happiness, and self-esteem than individuals who did not disclose their problems (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981), it would seem intuitive that abused men would want to gain this benefit as well. As purported by Migliaccio (2001), the three reasons men do not disclose or seek support involve (1) self-reliance, suggesting men should not request help, (2) stoicism, necessitating “suppression of a whole range of human needs, aims, feelings and forms of expression” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 37), and (3) maintaining perceptions of relational control, possibly an attempt to mask feelings of inadequacy. Certainly, a man’s perceived lack of power in an abusive situation would affect his disclosing of victimization (Sarantakos, 1999). Therefore, men are viewed as deviant and not as likely to receive support, when they venture outside the norm of self-reliant, stoic, controlling masculinity (Migliaccio, 2001).

Stigma

A second barrier to productive communication for men appears to be the stigma associated not only with abuse but with being an abused man in particular. Goffman (1959) proposed that humans in social settings naturally group individuals according to attributes; the patterned actions in each categorization provide a basis for social norms. As a result, stigma is contextual and relationship-specific. Stigmas do not reside in individuals but socially with others who determine stigmatized identities (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Thus, the culture in which one resides may determine one’s assignation to stigmatized groups.

Intimate abuse, assuming the signs—physical and psychological—are hidden from outside others, may be an example of what Goffman (1963) identified as individual character deficit stigma or what Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) conceptualize as concealable stigma. *Discreditable* (Goffman, 1963) individuals may have the most difficulty finding similar others, due to the fact that their status is not readily observable. In their study of stigmatized identities, Frable and others (1998) found those with concealable stigmas to feel less positively about themselves and to be more depressed and anxious than both control groups with no stigma and conspicuously stigmatized groups. One way stigmatized individuals may cope with threats to their identity is to simply withdraw from potentially negative situations (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Men may therefore find it easier to maintain an abusive status quo than to deal with managing the possible rejection and negative outcomes disclosure entails for them.

Discussions of stigmatized individuals must also include consideration of identity management. Stigmatized identities of men become especially salient when examining their disclosures. One form of stigmatized identity management of particular interest to this study was that of information management (Goffman, 1963). This aspect of identity management is salient on a communication level; information surrounding abuse may be disclosed or hidden. Questions involved in information management of stigma include, to whom and how does one disclose, and how are those communicative decisions made? Information management by stigmatized individuals sheds light on general communicative interactions. Communication scholars can benefit from this application, involving not only the tensions involved in social interactions but also the face, display, and disclosure rules surrounding communication episodes. Therefore, based on notions of information management with stigmatized identities, the following research questions were set forth: (1a) If they decide to reveal their abuse, to whom do men abused by female partners initially disclose? (1b) What factors influence these men's initial decisions to disclose?

Privacy Management and Face Considerations Surrounding Revelations of Abuse

Disclosing personal information, particularly when that information is detrimental to self, as in the case of abuse victims, has been shown to provide catharsis and may result in reception of tangible and emotional support (Cramer, 1990). In addition to information management as a tool to cope with stigma, abused men must handle a variety of communication factors including negotiating the face concerns inherent with vulnerable disclosures.

Disclosure of a problem first necessitates relational trust (Steel, 1991). Victims of a traumatic experience need to simultaneously feel heard, validated, and safe. Often, however, revealing such experiences makes the discloser vulnerable (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997; Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Ros-Mendoza, 1996). It is a difficult tradeoff and may influence the types of strategies abused men use to communicate their victimization to others. Abused men must first consider possible negative outcomes in vulnerable or uncertain social interactions (Petronio, 2000). When given a choice, individuals often choose to disclose when they expect support and solidarity from an individual (Bishop, 1996). Disclosers' evaluations of recipients' personalities may be influenced by predicted reactions to the information, perceptions of trust between the recipient and discloser (Hosman & Tardy, 1980), and even

the recipient's mood at the time of the interaction (Barbee, 1990). As a result, both current and past relationship dynamics play a role in the interaction. Perceptions must exist that the listener is in a position to offer support; these perceptions may be formed from signals in the interaction. The management of the interaction thus becomes situationally important. Cues in the immediate scenario may influence individuals' responses to stigmatizing situations (Major & O'Brien, 2005). It is therefore imperative to view the interaction by looking at the face concerns in disclosive episodes.

A privacy management perspective (Petronio, 2002) assists in providing explanations of disclosive events. The possibility of losing face may influence the choices men make when disclosing (Berger, 1997), especially if outcomes of that disclosure have large societal implications (such as revictimization through social stigma). Initial work on boundary management involved the examination of self-disclosure patterns from children who were the victims of sexual abuse (Petronio et al., 1997; Petronio et al., 1996). The concepts applied in those studies contribute to present understandings of abusive relationships and the privacy management issues inherent therein. According to current perspectives of privacy management, individuals use varied criteria to determine access to private information. Personal boundaries are protected from intentional or unintentional invasion via these conditions (Petronio, 2002). Male victims must therefore choose specific strategies to implement when disclosing their abuse. Cutrona, Suhr, and MacFarlane (1990) noted that disclosure can involve emotional demonstrations and expressions of doubt or complaining about situational management. Exploring the circumstances surrounding abused men's disclosures allows for identification of face concerns and privacy management issues that exist among a particular understudied population. Therefore, the following research questions were also addressed: (2a) What specific communication strategies do men report using to disclose their abuse? (2b) What are the outcomes men report receiving from initial disclosure episodes? (2c) What type of impact do the outcomes of these men's disclosures have on their future decisions to disclose?

Methods

Participants

Solicitations to participate in telephone interviews were posted online in forum discussions, chat groups, and message boards devoted to topics including male abuse, family violence, and family conflict. Men were

recruited who viewed themselves as presently in or formerly a part of an abusive, romantic relationship with a woman.

As a result of this procedure, 28 men participated in interviews. They ranged in age from 28 to 58 years old, with an average age of 45.8 years old ($SD = 8.72$). The current relational status of the majority of men was either single ($n = 15$) or remarried ($n = 10$). Three of the men in this study were still in relationships with their abusers. All men's relationships with their abuser—past or present—were that of marriage or extended cohabitation. The average relationship length of men no longer in relationships with their abusers was 4.41 years, ranging from 3 months to 16 years in duration ($SD = 3.93$). For men no longer in a relationship with their abuser, the relationship ended an average of 6.54 years prior to participation in the study ($SD = 4.81$). For men who were still with their abusers at the time of the interview, the average length of their relationship was going on 9 years ($SD = 4.93$). The majority of men had completed some level of college or specialty degree ($n = 24$) and worked in white-collar careers ($n = 22$). The characteristics of the men interviewed in this study resonated as surprisingly similar to demographics reported by men calling a domestic abuse help line tailored to men (Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007), which may speak to the potential ability of these narratives to capture the experiences of men similarly abused. All of the men in this sample fit characteristics of abusive relationships identified as *intimate terrorism* (Johnson & Leone, 2005). In other words, the relationships reported by these men were characterized by experiences of *coercive control* from their female partners in the form of both physical (e.g., punching, beaten with objects such as bats and kitchen pots, stabbed) and psychological abuse, often experienced in extreme forms (e.g., held at gunpoint, having children taken from them, controlled access to all financial resources).

Interviews

The interviews ranged from 29 minutes to 1.5 hours ($M = 57.82$ minutes, $SD = 16.24$). The interviews were conducted via telephone due to geographical constraints. To locate a sufficient sample of men willing to be interviewed concerning their abuse, it was necessary to extend the call for participants across the United States. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and resulted in close to 200 single-spaced pages of pure men's talk (eliminating researcher questions and nonfluencies). Embracing a grounded theory approach including the utilization of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data were content analyzed for category formation, fit, refit, and emergent fit (Glaser, 1978). More

specifically, the narrative of each man was examined separately, noting emergent themes. This was followed by comparison to the data from other men's narratives, constantly noting minor discrepancies and consistencies among the participants; from this step emerged an initial list of categories. Finally, data were rechecked after the master category list was completed to ensure consistency of themes and to find any competing explanatory categories amid the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The exploratory nature of this study contributed in large part to the implementation of open-coding strategies, followed by application of the theoretical perspectives through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This type of analysis contributes to future critical perspectives of theoretical interpretation in the results.

Saturation was achieved very early in the study (by the third and fourth interviews) with common themes being repeated and no new concepts emerging (Leininger, 1994), minimizing discriminant data among men to very little, if any, as will be shown in the results. To support both the many convergent themes and the few divergent themes revealed, exemplars from the narratives are given in the results to follow. To recheck the consistency and accuracy of the men's responses, a random portion of the men were sent their completed transcriptions and asked to notify the researcher of discrepancies in their reports. Responses from all the men in this randomized subsample confirmed the accuracy of the data as both conceptually intended and accurately recorded.

Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

Although some of the men's disclosures ultimately resulted in receiving aid for their abuse, all interactions labeled as "the first time I disclosed the abuse" were said by the men to be approached with the sole goal of "revealing" the information.

Contemplating Disclosure to Whom

Question 1a was asked to discover the initial source of men's disclosure regarding their abuse. As may be expected in an atmosphere of stigmatizing relations, all of these men's initial disclosures of their abuse were made to individuals with whom they had an established relationship, predominantly close friends and family members not residing in the abusive household. Prominently discussed were personal characteristics of the person/s to whom they disclosed. Consistent with past research (Steel, 1991), being able to identify a discloser recipient was contingent on the men's feelings of both trust and respect for the person to whom

they disclosed. Respect for the recipient of the disclosure was necessary in that the men felt a need to simultaneously respect any feedback, opinions, or advice they received.

I was looking for somebody to tell me that I wasn't insane, that I wasn't a horrible person who was causing this woman to do all these terrible things to me, you know?

And there was an older guy; he had been around. He's like an elder. And I would share like different things that were going on. You know, if something was wrong. There were a couple of the older men, who we all belonged to the same labor union. And I would call them. If there became like a dilemma, I would always call them first. And see what they said. They were older, they were married, you know, I would just try to use their experiences.

In addition to respect for the listening party, perceptions of a close and satisfying relationship were perceived as necessary for disclosure. It is likely that disclosing to these individuals would occur for the men due to relationship-specific reasons (Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron, 2000), as tendencies exist to disclose to those who are not only liked (Dindia, 2000) but also trusted (Petronio et al., 1996). Men's past encounters with disclosure recipients, perceptions of their shared relationship quality, and ultimately anticipated responses may be excellent predictors of a willingness to disclose sensitive information (Greene & Serovich, 1995). In turn, and following from theories of information management of stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963), decisions to disclose to certain individuals are accompanied by varied choices surrounding the type of communication used to reveal this private information. The men here noted that they initially considered formal organizations, such as legal or domestic violence industries, as outlets for disclosure and support due to a "respect for authority" and a "trust in the system." However, every man ($n = 20$) who initially considered these formal institutions for the above reasons claimed these components were nonexistent for them after they experienced "the system," detailed in the subsequent discussion.

Contemplating If and How

The second component of the first research question (1b) sought to discover factors influencing how and why men initially chose to disclose their abuse. Most of the men mentioned disclosing for the benefit of emotional release.

You know men don't really have a big, usually, men don't develop these big social support mechanisms of conversationally talking about emotions, and one of 'em was a guy I work with. And it was just kinda, the question kind of, you know, I guess there's a little pressure to get it out of you to talk to someone.

One of the things I realized was that holding in when you feel slighted, and not being honest about emotions, more or less. I think that would be the worst. About not being honest with myself when something hurts emotionally. To say it hurts. And you gotta find some way of letting it out.

The advantages of self-disclosure have been established in past research. These benefits include better overall physical health and higher levels of happiness and self-esteem (Veroff et al., 1981), which may be particularly salient to stigmatized individuals (Frable et al., 1998). Additional reasons those with stigmatized identities may disclose include relational development and social control (Yep, 2000), both also previously mentioned as inherent constructs of masculinity (Migliaccio, 2001). However, when the topic of the disclosure itself deals with a relationship problem such as abuse, these factors may influence the likelihood of disclosure, due to the possibility of losing perceived relational control. When that happens, the typically researched outcomes of disclosure appear to differ for this particular group of stigmatized individuals.

A key feature in literature on masculinity is that of maintaining a semblance of relational control (Migliaccio, 2001). For men in abusive relationships, the desire to disclose the problem and thus gain the previously mentioned benefits appears secondary to their primary goal of maintaining a relationship in which they have invested (Lupri, 1990). Pertinent to relational maintenance is also the existence of face concerns when dealing with outside others. Many of the men ($n = 21$) in this study reported concerns that individuals outside the relationship would view them as less masculine if they were unable to maintain relationships with their wives or girlfriends. Reporting desires to save face is consistent with research demonstrating relational power and interpersonal control as implicit concepts in outward demonstrations of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sarantakos, 1999). Illustrating these ideas of outsiders' perceptions and stigmatized identities, men referenced their abusive situations:

But I'm kind of an old fashioned guy. And this shouldn't happen. And in my mind, everything that happens to the family is my fault, you know. Good or bad. You know, so it's a real old-fashioned macho type attitude, but there it is.

I think I didn't speak out because we as men are supposed to take it, if that makes sense. I mean, we are supposed to be the strong ones in the world or whatever. You know, that's, it's either, we deserve it because we [men as a whole] caused so much abuse in the past, or you know, not something that we'd talk about.

These culturally ingrained notions of a traditionally acceptable masculine identity often stand in direct contrast to the reality of private, lived relations for these men. Having been told to "be a man," abused men's perceptions are of a public that has no desire to embrace deviation from that admonition. Dissimilar others are silenced and relegated to a private sphere—the precise location in which these men are demasculinized.

Oppression of certain groups may be influenced by the manner in which privacy is characterized by a culture. *Private relations* are determined by power dynamics; this fact alone speaks to the "need to expand our thinking about power to look at the ways that the notions of equality and impartiality imparted to 'public' communication have marginalized and excluded many groups, perspectives and voices" (Cooks, 2000, p. 210). One man spoke of years of traumatic experiences from his wife, but then stated:

The cultural background that I come from, it's just the kind of thing where we don't want to reveal these things to the outside world. We keep everything inside. . . . You have to be careful what you say to people. They're gonna judge you, without even knowing them. The more you explain something, the worse it's gonna sound.

Therefore, societal tools of control and norm maintenance appear to mandate that abused men, who deviate from norms of appropriate discourse or who make culturally induced private problems into public matters, be forced, through communicative regulation, back into the obscurity of their hidden worlds. These societal tools and the idea of masculine identity maintenance thus contribute to our understanding of the factors influencing men's initial decisions to disclose. In conjunction with the constructs influencing disclosure, the strategies these men choose to implement if and when they *do* disclose may be similarly affected.

Enacting Disclosing

Enacting Strategies. The second research question (2a) sought to discover the communicative strategies men reported using to disclose their abuse. The abused men in this study frequently mentioned using simple

disclosure as a tool to gauge, based on received reactions, whether to pursue support from the targeted individual or to seek help elsewhere. As one man stated,

I think these things [abusive relationships] are no longer the responsibility, or at least seen as the responsibility of the individual doing them. And when I bring it up from the other side, being a male, um, people just don't want to hear it. But I do try to mention, if as nothing else, to put my feelers out to see if it happens to other people, um, to see if there's any empathy.

Often, *incremental disclosure* has been used as a communicative strategy or tool to monitor responses when disclosing sensitive information (Petronio et al., 1996). When deciding how and if to disclose, individuals have considered expected interactional outcomes and the nature of the information (i.e., taboo versus commonly discussed topics) (Petronio, 2002). The expectations associated with disclosing abuse may be influenced by men's previous revealing experiences. It is on this past feedback to revelations of their abuse that men appear to predicate future decisions.

Enacting Outcomes. Exploring the reported outcomes of these men's initial disclosure attempts (2b), it was found that first attempts to divulge were met with a variety of responses. Men felt their disclosures were met with both supportive and denigrating reactions. Supportive reactions were characterized by the men as fulfilling the basic interpersonal expectations outlined above (i.e., relational trust and respect for the disclosure recipient). When men did disclose to family or close friends, they tended to receive support in the form of emotional understanding, advice, and assistance to leave the abusive partner. However, that support was typically offered only after the men initiated separation from their spouses themselves, and in some cases leaving one's partner was a condition of support offered by family members. This desire to have men deal with their own relational problems speaks to the cultural expectation of keeping private realms under the domain of individuals, even when it is detrimental to those parties (Cooks, 2000). In most cases ($n = 26$), the reactions the men received on disclosing were not positive. As discussed earlier, blaming the male victim is likely when men are perceived to have the ability to defend themselves. As one man responded, when asked who was the first person he told about his victimization,

My marriage counselor, who told me, which put the fear of God into me, "What did you do to make her hit you?" And that really made me realize that I've gotta be very judicious about how I approach this.

Another man who sought support from a marriage counselor stated:

What would happen is I'd go in with injuries, with bandages on, on crutches. And the counselors would say, this one time in particular, I'd gone in, when she had cut my throat. And I went in, and the counselor said, "Oh my, you must have had such a bad week!" She was talking to my wife. "Oh, [wife's name] you must've had such a bad week that you would act out in this way, you know? Let's take care of you." What would happen is, I would talk about what would happen, and she'd be sitting in the corner crying. And then it would reverse as soon as we got out the door. I'd be the one crying, and she'd be raising hell that it was exposed. So yeah, years of counseling that did absolutely no good.

However, it should be noted that not every man had negative reactions from counselors. An exception, one man noted,

Yeah, I had convinced her after she'd stabbed me that we'd go to couple counseling, so we went to couple counseling. And we were there three sessions; the third session was you know, about my wife or whatever, and about 30 minutes into it, the counselor kept telling her, "You know, you need to listen. You're blaming everything on him. We're here to talk about you and what you've done wrong." And she [wife] basically looked at my counselor and said, "You're a fucking quack," and looked at me and said, "We're leaving."

Two sources of particularly prevalent and caustically negative reactions to these men's disclosures were the legal system and law enforcement communities. While individuals experienced denigrating reactions from other realms (i.e., colleagues, domestic violence workers, counselors), none of them carried the authority of these two spheres. In half of all cases ($n = 14$), an abusive incident necessitated calling the police (and thus, disclosing what had happened). When police arrived, some of the men ($n = 5$), bleeding from the abuse, were detained or even arrested until the abusive woman became calm and the situation was thus "deescalated."

After the police came, she wanted to take the car, wanted to take our son. And the cops are telling her, "You can do that. You can do anything you want." And I'm going no, no, no. And the cops are just telling me to shut up. So since the cop wasn't going to help me out, she was determined she was gonna go. I stood in front of the driver-side door of our car and I just stood there, stood my ground. And she came right up to me, with our son in her left hand. And she began to raise her fists, punching me in the face, in the chest, kneed me in the groin.

She started slapping, scratching, all that other kind of stuff. And the police officers just watched the entire thing. And I just took it. I didn't lay one hand on her. The minute I got my hand up to block her third punch to my face, both cops came up out of their police unit, walked toward me with their hands on their nightsticks, looking right at me. They're not looking at her. And so I knew that they were thinking that since I raised my hand up to block, that I was gonna retaliate. The minute I did that they were gonna approach me. So I put my hand back down, took about three steps back, and then she pushed me and I landed on my backside. And then I just walked away. And I started weeping. Right there. I just started crying. I couldn't believe what had just taken place with those two police officers there. The cops didn't leave until she got into the car and drove off with my son.

Such experiences were not unique to the men in this sample. Other instances of men being arrested when their wives abused them without reciprocation have been documented in previous research (Stacey, Hazelwood, & Shupe, 1994).

Enacting Future Contemplation. The final component to the second research question (2c) sought to explore whether the outcomes of disclosure affected future revelation attempts. When the outcomes were supportive, consistent with research on other stigmatized groups, expectations of positive reciprocity to the disclosure served to enhance the interpersonal relationship through perceptions of increasing intimacy (Yep, 2000). Interestingly, when men viewed the person to whom they disclosed as nonresponsive or otherwise neutral (but not negative), they were unsatisfied with the encounter. These neutral interactions of disclosure attempts received the same unenthusiastic reactions from the men as did the negatively valenced, denigrating interactions.

I went to my pastor, was my very first thing. What a waste of time! I mean, I went to him and explained what was going on. We were good friends. And I sat in his backyard. And it was like, oh, what should I say? It's like when you talk to a friend and they just listen. And that's it. You know, it was like, I talked to him several times, and it didn't really help. But anyhow, I don't hold that against him. Or maybe I do. Not sure. But his advice during, before, and after was relatively worthless.

It may be that this lack of responsiveness from the initially trusted party not only influenced perceptions of future disclosures but also threatened the men's identities and sense of security in the interaction. When support, even in the form of listening, was not present, the men may have felt a

need to hide their own needs and negative feelings from these *neutral* individuals, to avoid further perceptions of burdening or scaring off current members of their social network (Silver, Wortman, & Crofton, 1990).

However, and in most cases ($n = 20$), the negative reactions received upon revealing their victimization silenced the men. Additionally, they were also less likely to pursue disclosure with other, future parties. The overwhelming majority of men ($n = 27$) in this sample who disclosed to the legal community, comprised of domestic violence workers, counselors, attorneys, and police enforcement, received either denial of assistance or negative behavior (i.e., derogatory comments or incarceration) in response to their disclosure. Eight men interviewed went out of their way to mention their wives' careers, which out of the 28 couples included 3 women working in the domestic violence industry, 3 police officers, and 2 attorneys.

In the interviews, members of the domestic violence community and police officers were said to overtly deny support (i.e., counseling or medical attention) to these men. As one man stated, "The cure is worse than the disease." *Denial of the existence of the problem* was an outcome men received from a variety of sources—family members, attorneys, and police officers—but primarily from individuals outside a close, personal relationship with the man. It could be that societal maintenance of masculinity as a construct of power results in deviant men being accused of failure (Migliaccio, 2001). Thus, blaming abused men was also mentioned as a byproduct of disclosure to counselors or workers in the domestic violence community.

Formal organizations typically considered receptive to disclosures of abuse were no longer an option for these men and appeared to influence and reinforce their decisions to hide the information, subsequently revealing their abuse only to close relational others or not at all. The outcomes of disclosure for these men were thus varied in valence and consequence to their identities and their future decisions to disclose.

The men remarked that their interactions with these sources of potential support influenced later disclosure decisions to such an extent that disclosure was postponed for years, in many cases, if they revealed the information at all. Half of the men interviewed in this study said they would be extremely cautious to whom they disclosed or sought support from today. Particularly, those within the legal system or the domestic violence industry were considered "off-limits" for these men.

It gave me a lot of skepticism about a lot of things. I used to respect the law and authority. I mean, being in the military for 20 years, I understand how authority works. I understand the value of respect. I understand the value of honesty. And having been exposed to a system where

I know that I was honest and she was not, but she was given the credibility of being the honest one of the two, you can't help but internalize that and come up with a less than positive outlook on a lot of things.

The other half of participants felt they would have no problem disclosing their abuse to anyone. However, the men's desires to "get the information [about men being abused] out there" through formal research did not extend to their tendency to seek personal support from or disclose to the above outlets themselves.

Disclosure by the men is resonant with the coping strategies implemented by individuals who feel the results of negative stereotyping or discrimination (Major & O'Brien, 2005). As with other stigmatized identities, disclosure management involves a balance of weighing stigma against lost support by failing to disclose (Cline & McKenzie, 2000). Men in abusive relationships may find it easier to maintain an abusive status quo than to deal with managing possible rejection and the negative privacy outcomes disclosure entails for them.

Ultimately, men abused by female partners must manage a variety of decisions when choosing if, how, and to whom to disclose their victimization. The men in this sample reported a variety of strategies to enact disclosure. Men experienced primarily negative or denigrating outcomes associated with their disclosure to public sources and in some cases experienced positive support outcomes when disclosing to those in personal relationships. The outcomes initially experienced influenced the men's future decisions to disclose to similar sources, or to disclose at all.

Application and Future Concerns

The "more difficult the problem, the less important the surface representation and the more important it is to understand the underlying principles" (Shapiro, 2002, p. 493). The findings presented here paint a picture of behind-the-scenes interactions, the underlying communicative principles, of abused men's disclosures and demonstrate important practical implications. For example, knowing the experiences other men have encountered when revealing their abuse can inform abuse victims' decisions about whether to disclose and to whom, serving personal privacy-protection functions. The results reported in this chapter provide theoretically based, exploratory evidence of the phenomenon of abused men, often accounted solely through nonacademic anecdotes. The findings presented here lend credence to the notion that men who are abused by their female partners may encounter unique barriers when communicating their experiences to others. The challenges these men face suggest

that the otherwise theoretical issues of stigmatized identity, hegemonic masculinity, and communicative disclosure strategy have very real implications for these men.

Although generalizability is limited, the descriptive nature of this research design allows for greater depth of information on individual experiences and may be an important first step in research of this kind. Additionally, the recruitment procedures involved in this study involved their own set of limitations. Posting the call for participants online limits those without access to a computer and additionally selects those men who have typically already sought out a type of support online through their chosen forum. However, because this study does not attempt to generalize beyond the findings, the results remain important and intriguing.

Men who lack knowledge about their situation have only cultural views to inform their identity constructions. "Culture affects the way women and men understand domestic violence and its ramifications; thus, it is important to explore how cultural nuances may influence how women and men . . . determine norms and values" in their relationships, especially in cases of abuse (Few & Rosen, 2005, p. 268). This research is exploratory in nature and sets a foundation for further complex questions to emerge from the findings. For example, the characteristics of effective support providers for stigmatized individuals, and abused men in particular, will need to be investigated further, as certain types of support have been regarded as more desirable from some providers than others (Taylor, Falke, Shoptaw, & Lichtman, 1986). Such findings also contribute to the design of support interventions, particularly for stigmatized individuals. As in the case of other stigmatized identities (e.g., HIV-infected, Yep, 2000), careful research on the factors affecting the disclosures of abused men may provide specific advice to be implemented in counseling for these victims.

Additionally, this research provides valuable insights for clinicians working with abused men or couples where an abused man has yet to be identified and/or validated. Sensitivity to face concerns and implementation of a privacy management perspective (i.e., through concepts such as 'incremental disclosure') may assist counselors in dealing with men reporting, or not explicitly reporting, abuse. Observed in regard to abused women, "the conflation of privacy and publicity" in abusive experiences "complicates the decision to disclose and conditions the ways in which abuse is conceptualized" (Dieckmann, 2000, p. 286). Merely disseminating research on this phenomenon may help remedy the lack of credible, scholarly information on men's abuse so that communication scholars can participate in changing individuals' perceptions of this type of victimization—in both academic research and, in turn, popular literature. The information obtained contributes to an understanding of the

diversity of abuse victims with the ultimate goal of lessening the stigma associated with men who seek support for female-initiated abuse, benefiting both the participants and others like them. It “may be possible to draw on the cohesive power that stigma apparently generates” to spur recruitment for both future research and for men seeking support (Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000, p. 216). Until we discover more clearly what abused men encounter when they seek support, and what they view as helpful in a support context, we cannot begin to offer help to these individuals, nor can we be absolutely certain that our current theories of disclosure apply to this particular population. The research presented in this chapter provides initial efforts in that direction.

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