

“When You’re Involved, It’s Just Different”

Making Sense of Domestic Violence

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This article explores how people make sense of domestic violence. The authors argue that it is easier to make sense of other people’s problems than your own. If people are trying to understand a social problem with which they are personally involved, they are likely to engage in interpretive work that connects their own experiences with the problem and with a possible troubled identity. However, the person not involved in the social problem does not have the additional troubled identity construction occurring. This process of evaluating claims and constructing different narratives of the self and the social problem helps explain the differences between victims’ and nonvictims’ understandings of social issues.

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Recently in a college classroom, students in the first author’s class were discussing domestic violence. After several days, it seemed clear that those students who had no direct experience with abuse had confident and aggressive, though typically simplified, explanations of the social problem. Yet those students who had had experience with abuse (as disclosed in their writings for class) appeared to be more hesitant about explaining the problem and more overwhelmed about trying to understand the social problem. Similar scenarios can be found on talk shows and in everyday conversations. The research described in this article examines how people try to make sense of domestic violence, why that process is different for victims and nonvictims, and why this difference matters. We argue that victims of domestic violence have a harder time making sense of the problem than those who have no firsthand or secondhand experience. Being intertwined with the social problem makes it harder to make sense of that problem. In other words, it is easier to make sense of other people’s problems. We do not mean to imply that the less confusing narrative is necessarily a better picture of the problem. But we do think it is important to explore how the clarity and confidence of one’s narrative affects the larger discourse on domestic violence.

The narratives people construct to understand social problems differ from the narratives they construct to understand their selves. If people are trying to understand a social problem with which they are personally involved, they are likely to engage in interpretive work that connects their own experiences with the problem and with a possible troubled identity. However, the person not involved in the social problem does not have the additional identity construction occurring. As one of the victims in our study said, “When you’re involved with it, it’s just different.” By drawing from theories on the construction of the self, troubled identities, and institutional selves, we give insight into the differences in how victims and nonvictims construct narratives of domestic violence.

Constructing the Self and the Social Problem

There is a large body of research on how social problems are constructed, how the claims are disseminated, and how these images influence public debate. Social constructionism assumes that what people believe and think about social problems has been shaped by claims-making. *Claims-making* refers to the activities of individuals, groups, or organizations that attempt to persuade others that a certain condition should be viewed as a social problem (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). There is a broad range of groups that compete to construct social problems and troubled identities. These “discursive environments” include professionals, self-help groups, personal experience, friends and family, policy, and media (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 13). The varied discursive environments provide multiple options for individuals to draw from institutional discourse to construct their understanding of social problems, including at times their own troubled identities.

Gubrium and Holstein (2001) argued that “our ability to choose between options—to use some options in order to resist others, or to construct new ones—can be as liberating as it is overwhelming and debilitating” (p. 19). Though the postmodern world has increased the number and diversity of narratives that are available, we argue that people do not encounter this range of sources on an equal basis. Victims are more likely to be exposed to a greater range of narratives on a problem and are more likely to be challenged by the complexity of trying to harmonize a narrative of their self and the social problem. Conversely, nonvictims who rely mostly on media frames are less overwhelmed in the task of constructing an understanding of domestic violence. Even with an increase in discursive narratives, we argue that nonvictims, those who are not directly involved, still tend to rely on a more limited range of relationships and sources to understand a problem. Their narratives are more robust in part because they rely on a less diverse range of sources, and they do not have to explain a troubled identity along with the social problem.

In our study, we will discuss how many nonvictims, who do not have the lived experience, say they rely primarily on media sources and other “common knowledge” that

floats through popular culture. This is not a new finding. Many studies find that the media are influential in framing social problems. The media play a crucial role in the institutionalization of social problems (Best, 1999) and in influencing people's perceptions of the nature and scope of social problems. A growing body of research indicates that the media are a main source of information for most people (Altheide, 2002; Berger, 1991; Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Holstein & Miller, 1993; Sasson, 1995). The media culture "helps shape everyday life, influencing how people think and behave, how they see themselves and other people, and how they construct their identities" (Kellner, 1995, p. 2). Discourse about social problems in the media contains more easily categorized experiences and less confusing frames for explaining social problems than does lived experience (Berns, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Loseke, 2001; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, & Weaver, 1992). We know from previous research that the media frame social problems in particular ways that often limit their representations. Research on media representations suggests that usually a small number of perspectives (or maybe just one) is dominant, whereas others are completely ignored. Thus, even those who consume many different types of media may still get only a limited picture of the social problem (Berns, 2004; Caringella-MacDonald, 1998; Meyers, 1997; Soothill & Walby, 1991).

Literature on the construction of the self can help us understand the differences in how people evaluate claims in the media and also how they evaluate personal experiences with social problems. There is a growing literature on what is referred to as "identity work" (Loseke, 2001), "biographical work" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995) or "sociology of the person" (Cahill, 1998) that explores how people try to sort out their lived experience with social problems and use institutional talk to help construct troubled identities. Individuals who have troubles in their lives, such as alcoholism or domestic violence, often turn to "institutional talk" to identify and construct the narratives of what it means to be an alcoholic or a victim of abuse (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). *Institutional talk* refers to the discourses used by institutions, groups, and organizations to help shape people's self narrative (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Much of the work of many institutions in the troubled persons industry is helping people to frame their experiences as troubled. Scholars have used the terms *troubled self* and *troubled identities* to refer to an interpretive process that people go through in identifying and understanding their selves as part of a social problem (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Not all people who experience social problems identify themselves as troubled or necessarily accept the institutional narrative. For example, Loseke (2001) showed in her research on battered women's support groups that many women come to the groups not ready to accept the official narrative that they are victims. However, in our study, it is a significant finding that lived experience does impact one's narrative construction of social problems. So we use the concept of "troubled self" within the context of the troubled identity literature, but also with the understanding that not all victims readily use that same label.

Other studies that examine victim narratives of lived experience show several significant findings. On one hand, at times victims do borrow from institutional talk to construct their narratives (Loseke, 2001) and to ensure that they get the help that they need (Lempert, 1997; Loseke, 2001). However, it is also common for victims to reject the formula stories, cultural scripts, or institutional talk used by others to frame their lived experience (Baker, 1997; Denzin, 1984; Lempert, 1997; Loseke, 1987, 2001). A main reason that victims may reject these narratives is because lived experience is more ambiguous and complicated than the official narratives allow (Lempert, 1996b, 1997; Loseke, 2001). Advocates and other “help providers” often reduce the complexity of lived experience and make victims’ acceptance of these narratives more complicated (Lempert, 1997; Loseke, 2001). In any case, constructing one’s narrative of abuse is a process that victims use to try to understand their own experiences (Lempert, 1994, 1997; Riessman, 1989; Tift, 1993). So it is important for them to try to draw from other sources to help them make sense of their experience and also to communicate it to others. Even though victims run into obstacles, such as gendered language that does not allow for their experiences (Lempert, 1996a) or simplified narratives from institutional talk that ignores the complexity of lived experience, they continue to try to make sense of the problem and their selves.

We continue to explore how the self is embedded in understanding social problems by investigating the construction of domestic violence by both victims and nonvictims. We further the inquiry into troubled identities and the construction of the self by comparing how victims and nonvictims construct their understandings of domestic violence and more specifically of victims. We build on the research on social problems and selves by showing that when the self is not involved in constructing the narrative of a social problem, it may be easier to construct narratives for understanding a social problem. When not having to explain lived experience, it is easier to develop a clearer and more robust narrative, but not necessarily a better narrative. When several sources of experience are used and the social problem is also a part of the self, evaluation of claims is more complex, which, it could be argued, is a good thing, but then the narratives of the problem may become more confusing. This article furthers our understanding of these issues through a study of how people understand domestic violence.

Method

Many of the studies that explore public attitudes about domestic violence rely on survey research. Though survey research is designed to investigate the opinions of large numbers of people, it is less useful for discovering *how* people developed those opinions. To learn more about how people evaluate and use different sources of information, we conducted an in-depth, qualitative study of how individuals understand domestic violence and what sources they draw on to develop their opinions. This study is based on interviews with 20 people who were selected by randomly sampling

nonacademic staff at a Midwestern university.¹ The interviewees were 11 women and 9 men. Individuals ranged in age from 20 to the mid-50s, and all but 2 were White. Everyone had at least a high school education and most had college degrees, ranging from associate's to master's. The first author conducted all the interviews. We use these in-depth interviews to illustrate the interpretive process individuals use in constructing narratives of domestic violence. Although the sample is small and homogeneous, this article is designed to shape future research in the important areas of social problems and victims' perspectives.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions. The primary topics of the interviews were (a) when and how the interviewees had learned about domestic violence, and (b) their opinions regarding victims and abusers as well as the causes of and solutions for domestic violence. After their initial answers about when and how they had learned about domestic violence, individuals were asked about specific sources, including media, personal experience, counselors, domestic violence advocates, police, social workers, school, church, social groups (such as youth groups or civic clubs), books, family, friends, and conventional wisdom. We use the term *domestic violence* in this article with the understanding that there are complications in trying to label a problem. Because the name used to describe any social problem can influence the understanding and scope of the problem, during the interviews the first author explained to people that the scope of the problem is often described with different terms including *domestic violence*, *family violence*, *wife abuse*, *husband abuse*, *battered women*, and *battered men*. This was an attempt to help the interviewees think beyond one particular category and what it implies.

We use two terms to distinguish the types of experience discussed in this article: *firsthand* and *secondhand*.² Firsthand experience refers to having been a victim or an abuser in an abusive relationship. (However, no one in this study claimed to have been an abuser.) Secondhand experience refers to knowing other people who have had the firsthand experience, such as friends, family, or colleagues. We did not set out to interview a particular number of victims and nonvictims, but rather relied on random sampling. Out of the sample of 20 people, the composition was as follows: Seven people (4 women and 3 men) had firsthand experience with domestic violence, that is, they had been victims. Four of these (3 women and 1 man) were abused as adults and 3 (1 woman and 2 men) were abused as children (but not as adults). People with firsthand experience also had a lot of secondhand experience through their friends and professional experience, primarily through advocates. Thirteen people had no firsthand experience with domestic violence. These people say they rely primarily on media for understanding domestic violence. Though some of them had secondhand experience, 6 individuals claimed that they were not aware of knowing someone who was a victim or abuser. We focus primarily on the differences between those with firsthand experience and those with neither firsthand nor secondhand experience. Those who are not direct victims, but have substantial secondhand experience, such as from work or friends and family, are also likely to

draw from diverse sources of information and have a harder time explaining domestic violence in a simple way compared to those who have no firsthand or secondhand experience. However, those with secondhand experience but who are not victims are not as likely to be challenged by having to explain how their own troubled identity is connected to domestic violence.

Nonvictims: Explaining the Problem

The narrative that nonvictims used to explain the problem reflects a formula story for domestic violence. Loseke (2001) described formula stories as follows:

Formula stories are narratives about types of experiences (such as “wife abuse”) involving distinctive types of characters (such as the “battered woman” and the “abusive man”). As such stories become widely acknowledged ways of interpreting and conveying experience, they can become virtual templates for how lived experience may be defined. As formula stories pervade a culture, people increasingly use them to make sense of their lives and experiences. (p. 107)

Loseke (2001) argued that though formula stories can help make sense of troubles, in the process the “complexity and indeterminacy of lived experience” get left behind (p. 107). In her research, Loseke illustrated how victims may borrow from the formula stories, but they continue to rely on other stories from their lived experience that often contradict the formula stories. Our study illustrates that it may be the nonvictims who more readily accept and use formula stories to construct their narrative of the social problem. Because nonvictims are less likely to have other stories that contradict, or at least expand, the formula stories, their narrative appears to be more robust and confident. We argue that one of the reasons those with no firsthand experience can rely on a formula story is because much of the information is from “forgotten sources.” This section first describes three common and dominant parts of the narratives of those with no firsthand experience. Then we will discuss their sources and how they rely on “stock victims.”

Explaining Victims

We describe three elements of the narratives of nonvictims in our study that reflect a more general formula story for understanding domestic violence. These elements are not only the dominant parts of their narrative but also are reflected in popular media representations of the problem and sometimes in advocates’ narratives (Baker, 1997; Berna, 2004; Loseke, 2001). First, nonvictims explained many reasons for why victims stay. Second, they described victims as lacking personal qualities that might otherwise allow them to prevent the abuse. And finally, nonvictims focus on the victim significantly more than the abuser.

Those individuals in our study who had no firsthand experience with abuse had a lot of “understanding” about the victims, including their typical characteristics and reasons why they have trouble leaving abusive relationships. Their descriptions of the problem are more clear-cut, formal, and typified than those who have firsthand experience with abuse, which we discuss in the next section. The typical characteristics and reasons nonvictims gave reflect a common list of reasons for why victims stay in abusive relationships that emerged in part out of early psychological and sociological research on battered women. The list of reasons was disseminated through the media after the late 1970s when the battered women’s movement helped to gain public, scholarly, and media attention on the subject. Though certainly not all research agrees on these “reasons,” they have become “common knowledge” in the sense that they are an active part of popular discourse. Most individuals who used the media as a main source of information were able to repeat these reasons, including financial problems, love, guilt, threats, low self-esteem, and no social support. These ideas are a part of the typical formula story for domestic violence and are the foundation for the narrative that nonvictims use to make sense of victims.

Nonvictims had images and certain profiles in mind when they thought about victims of domestic violence. The characteristics most often attributed to victims are low self-esteem, passivity, and weakness. And all the nonvictims described victims as women who are abused by men. Kathy said, “I see the victim as kind of being a weak person. Not aggressive enough to take control of the matter.” Lori had a similar description of victims: “I think of a woman who would be considered passive and submissive in people’s eyes and maybe shy and a little withdrawn.” Jackie echoed these thoughts and added that there is a “certain amount of insecurity in the victim that lets it happen more than once.” Both Curtis and James also describe the victim as having low self-esteem. When asked why they thought that, they both described television shows they had seen. Curtis referred to television programs but none in particular. James referred to *COPS*. Carol had a very definite image of victims and even called some people “natural born victims,” which she defines as

people that don’t have very high self-esteem. They don’t have any confidence in themselves whether or not it’s imagined or someone has told them this over and over as they were growing up. Some people are not strong personalities. Some people are willing to let people tell them what to do. They can’t make up their mind. I suppose it goes back to no self-confidence or no self-esteem because they don’t think they can make good decisions.

Lori discussed how a victim’s low self-esteem, combined with fear, kept her from leaving the relationship:

There were also cases where they feared for their lives as one of the reasons they would go back to the men because their husbands would threaten to kill them if they stayed away. It may also be reasons like low self-esteem and not feeling like they could survive without their husbands. I guess with the husband on a day-to-day basis saying negative

things to her—saying “you can’t do this and you can’t do that”—a woman just starts to have a low self-esteem and starts to think that she can’t do anything at all.

People have more to say about victims than abusers. In one study, individuals participating in focus groups were asked, “Why do men beat women?” According to the researchers, “Many people reacted with a long pause or asked us to clarify the question. Some attempted to shift the focus to the previous conversation. Others shied away from answering the direct question” (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997, p. 32). The majority of people said they did not know why men would abuse their partners. When people did talk about abusers, they most often referred to alcohol and childhood abuse as reasons why they abuse (Klein et al., 1997). Our interviewees also gave alcohol and childhood abuse as the reasons why abusers use violence.

When discussing victims, the public often holds them personally responsible for the abuse. Victims are blamed for provoking abuse because of their behavior. They are also blamed for not leaving because they are too weak, not in control, or too passive. These explanations place the blame directly on the victim. However, when discussing abusers, people use explanations—alcohol use and childhood abuse—that place the blame on factors external to the individual.

The Family Violence Prevention Fund helped conduct one of the largest national studies on public opinions of domestic violence (Klein et al., 1997). It found that people find it easier and perhaps more enjoyable to talk about victims as opposed to talking about abusers. People did not want to focus on the abuser. “It seemed easier to keep him out of the conversation. They were much more comfortable talking about the woman—why she stays, what happens to her, and how they could help her” (Klein et al., 1997, p. 48). When we interviewed people about their understanding of domestic violence, we also discovered that they clearly had more to say about victims than abusers. Though the authors of the Family Violence Prevention Fund study say that it is a “heartening sign of success for the battered women’s movement” to hear that participants expressed sympathy for abused women, it should also be viewed as a clear finding that people are not able to talk about abusers or about the social factors related to domestic violence. We suggest that one of the reasons it is easier for nonvictims to talk about victims rather than abusers is that the battered women’s movement and a majority of media stories focus primarily on victims (Berna, 2004).

Media Experience and Forgotten Sources

Those with no firsthand experience with abuse have to rely on sources of information other than lived experience to explain the problem. The majority of nonvictims in this study claimed that they rely primarily on the media as their source of information. However, as we will illustrate, their understandings of the problem often draw on an image of a “stock victim” that they have constructed from what appears to be forgotten sources or what they consider “common knowledge.” Most of those

forgotten sources are likely from the media, but some may be from victims they have encountered but have forgotten until their memory is jarred. The following section describes the type of “forgotten sources” that allow for more rigid explanations of the problem because people can more easily select and categorize details that fit a general formula story that they know. Without having the troubled self to try to explain, nonvictims have an easier task of only explaining a general narrative for the social problem. In explaining other people’s troubled selves and not their own, they have an easier time making sense of the problem.

The nonvictims said they primarily relied on the media for their sources of information on domestic violence. Of the 13 people who have no firsthand experience, 10 of them said that the media are their main source of information. The other 3 said that media were a secondary source of information after friends and family. The most common media source of information about domestic violence mentioned was television, including news magazine programs such as *20/20*; *COPS*, which shows “real footage” of police work; talk shows, such as *Oprah*; dramatic shows; soap operas; and television movies. Other than television, the two most common media sources mentioned were magazines and newspapers. There are diverse media that present domestic violence in much more complicated frames compared to the mass media, such as talk shows and reality crime shows. In the first author’s extended work (Berns, 1999, 2001, 2004), she shows how various media present different frames of domestic violence. For example, more explicitly political magazines or novels would likely have a different perspective than *Oprah* or *COPS*. However, when the individuals in this study did name a particular source, they overwhelmingly referred to the media best described as mass entertainment media. Usually when they discussed these media, they were often less specific about their examples. They referred to “reading it somewhere” or giving examples of possible magazines but not knowing which magazine or newspapers they read.

Not only are the media the main source of information for most nonvictims, but they are also lacking the diverse perspectives that come from lived experience. Those with no firsthand experience are also less likely to be exposed to institutional talk other than that which is disseminated through the mass media. It is possible that people who have no firsthand experience with abuse are not “looking” for others who are abused and therefore do not realize who might be involved in abusive relationships. Or individuals with no firsthand experience may not remember encounters or discussions they have had with people who are involved with abuse. James said that until about an hour into the interview, he had forgotten these various people involved in abusive relationships, including a murder victim.

When I first thought about coming here [to the interview], I didn’t think I knew anyone involved. And then sitting here talking about it I can remember my cousin being arrested for this, and my coworker being killed [by her husband] and that was a significant event. I don’t know how I could forget. That’s terrible, isn’t it?

Carol, who has no firsthand experience with abuse, also did not remember at first about a former mother-in-law who had been in an abusive relationship. I asked her to think about whether she knew anyone involved in an abusive relationship.

I don't think I do, not that I'm aware of. [Long pause.] Well, I've been married several times and my first mother-in-law was in a very abusive situation. I don't know if it was physical, but her husband drank a lot and he had a very violent temper. So, yes, I guess I do know someone but this was a very long time ago. But she survived it and went on to be married to someone who took care of her, but I'm sure there are scars.

Shirley also realized that she actually knew several people who had been involved in abusive relationships. This realization surprised her. She said, "I guess I knew more people than I thought I did."

If domestic violence is not a part of the self, recalling other troubled selves may not be as important. Or perhaps when these people do come into contact with victims and offenders, it does not make as lasting an impression because they are not negotiating those other selves with their own identity. Because nonvictims are not trying to understand their own troubled self, they may have less connection to other victims or other "troubled selves." Therefore, even if they do have contact with victims and offenders, they may not utilize those narratives in the same way that victims would.

The information that people use from media sources is also often based on forgotten sources. Often individuals accept as "fact" information apparently gained from the media for which they can remember no specific media source. When people were asked where they had heard something or why they had that opinion, most could not recount where they heard it. Sheri mentioned that information on domestic violence just generally will "work into your consciousness." Later in the interview, she stopped and reflected on how she got her information: "It's funny because sometimes I'm sitting here thinking, 'Where do I hear this stuff? Do I read it?'" Upon reflecting on where she gets her information, Sheri also wondered whether her opinion is her own or an actor's from a show that she watched. Similar to Sheri, other interviewees said they heard or read it somewhere, but could not even remember the medium let alone who might have said it. Often they referred to "the media" when describing where they get information. Sometimes they were able to name a more specific medium such as TV, a newspaper, or magazines. Usually, though, the individuals could not remember exact sources, or even the medium. Occasionally, they said that it "just makes sense." Sometimes they did not even try to think of a source for information, but rather treated it as "common knowledge," as Ron describes: "I think it is pretty common knowledge that the people who are abusers were most likely abused themselves as children."

At the end of the interview, Tim mentioned that he had a sense his reference for answering the questions was a "generic news story." He could not remember specific people or stories, but rather had stock images in his head from which he drew.

I have this vague sense that I've been answering these questions based on what I've been picking up in the media. But I really still don't have a specific remembrance of some actual news story. I just have this vague generic news story in my head. I can't remember specific persons or pictures, but just sort of the stock news story about this kind of thing. And there have been many of them, which is why I probably can't remember one specifically.

As we illustrate in the next section, when those with firsthand experience talked about victims, they generally referred to themselves or other victims they knew when trying to explain the problem. They were thinking about real troubled selves. For those who have no firsthand experience and rely mostly on the media, they typically refer to a "stock victim" that allows them to reconstruct details about a victim's experience. The mass media use formula stories in shaping their portrayals of domestic violence (Berns, 2004; Loseke, 1998). Most "media-created victims" in the entertainment media are less complicated than the stories that emerge from victims. Loseke (1998) found that at the level of lived experience, troubles are not easily understood and are often "experienced as a bewildering complex tangle of events" (p. 294). However, it is the official reality, the neatly packaged explanations, that are most powerful in the media. These neatly packaged explanations translate to a more robust narrative of the social problem from the untroubled selves compared to those troubled selves who refer to lived experience.

Victims: Explaining the Self, Explaining the Social Problem

When asked to explain a social problem, people who are directly involved with that problem not only face the task of constructing a narrative for the general problem, but they are simultaneously faced with the possibility of interpreting their self as a troubled self. Though we at times refer to victims as troubled selves, it should not be assumed that this is an automatic identification for individuals with firsthand experience. However, when trying to construct a narrative for a social problem, those individuals who are personally involved with the problem also face the task of explaining their own self. We draw upon those four individuals who experienced abuse as adults. In this section, we first explain the variety of sources victims use in thinking about the social problem of domestic violence. Second, we discuss how institutional talk plays a role in victims making connections between their experiences and a troubled identity as well as the larger social problem. And finally, we discuss how victims challenge cultural scripts about why victims stay to illustrate the complexity of their narratives compared to those who have no firsthand experience.

Lived Experience and Sources of Information

People with firsthand experience with abuse draw upon a variety of experiences to construct their narratives of the problem. These sources include their own abuse, stories from friends, their experience with advocates and other professionals, as well as media accounts. This variety of experience complicates their attempts to construct a narrative of the problem because the problem is also central to an understanding of the self.

When those with firsthand experience were asked to explain their understanding of domestic violence, they frequently referred back to their own experiences or the experiences of their friends. This process illustrates how intertwined the two narratives are for victims. Following are some examples of how victims explained aspects of the social problem by referring to their own experiences. Linda drew on her personal experience in understanding how the police handle domestic violence cases:

I think the police are inadequately trained. I contacted the police on several different times and some of them really don't understand the problem. And others are excellent.

Gina uses her experience to explain several elements of the problem including how abusers act in public and in private, how family members get involved, and how the police handle situations. The following excerpt from her interview illustrates one of the personal references she uses in constructing her narrative of the problem, in particular the way abusers act.

When they [police] got there, it's always "everything is fine." I can remember the police coming one time when Todd and I had a fight, and it was a good fight. Just about the time the cops came, his mom came home. It's a weird, fuzzy memory but we were outside in the yard fighting. He got increasingly upset. He took a machete off the wall and talked about how he should kill me. Then he was going to bury me in the cornfields so deep the police would never find me. That was pretty scary. He had locked the front door and put the chain on. Then the phone rang; it was a friend of ours. He answers it and it's like Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde. He goes, "Hi. How are you? Can you hold on?" Then he turns to me and says, "Don't you move a fucking muscle, bitch." And he turns back to the phone.

Though Randy expressed puzzlement over why people stay so long in abusive relationships and why he specifically waited so long to get out, he did offer some reasons why it is hard to leave. It is interesting that throughout Randy's interview, he used his own experiences to try to understand how women are trapped in abusive relationships. Even though he is a male victim, he assumed that most victims are female.

I think women get into situations with domestic violence and because the man is earning a living they don't feel like they have any place to go. They are afraid to step out

on their own because of the unknown as to whether or not they can do it. I think I had the same problems of getting out of the marriage, too. Financially, can I survive on my own? You're trapped because financially you think you can't do it. Once you take the step out you find out that you can survive. I think that holds a lot of women into it. It's not because women are stupid, but because they're afraid they can't survive. They feel trapped because financially they don't know. I experienced some of those feelings myself.

Victims may be more likely than nonvictims to interact with other victims. If so, these other victims provide additional references for them for trying to understand the problem. However, the other troubled selves may also complicate their attempts to explain the general problem, especially if the stories of the other victims are different and not easily categorized into formula stories (Berger, 1997; Loseke, 2001, 2003). In responding to a question about batterers, Gina referred to other victims in trying to construct a narrative for why people abuse. In the following excerpts, we can see that she first thinks about her current boyfriend and his past behavior. Then she draws from a past boyfriend who was abusive towards her. Both of these experiences are used to try to understand abusers in general.

I don't think there are any typical characteristics [of a batterer]. My current boyfriend in a past relationship was upset after he split up with his sweetie, punched a window and bloodied her windshield. That would be like a truly uncharacteristic thing for him to do. He's never been anything approximating violence. He and this old sweetie are still friends. It was just like a temporary insanity, truly a one-time incident, though very strong.

Then Gina draws from a past boyfriend who was abusive towards her as a comparison to what she experienced:

From what I know of my boyfriend, Todd, I was the special chosen one. After I split up with him in 1984, I talked to some of his other old girlfriends—nope, nothing. It was a lot of "why me?" I know his dad was violent to his mother, so I think it was a learned behavior. What's interesting is that many years later he apologized for everything. During that time [when he was abusing me,] he was drinking a lot and doing a lot of drugs. He wasn't really happy where he was in his life.

Gina explained that she eventually was able to leave that abusive relationship, but then explained that she knows it is not common for victims to be able to have closure on an abusive relationship.

More commonly, the woman continues to live in fear. I also know that domestic violence can be the woman being the violent one, but I'm just going with the stereotypical, traditional view. The woman continues to live in fear and resentment of her abuser. I don't think the guy ever views what he did was wrong.

When asked why she thinks that most victims live in fear, Gina said she draws from her friend's experience in making this judgment. "There's Donna and her first husband, Matt, and she continues to hate him for what he had done all these years ago. He lives in a state of denial that he was ever that bad."

Institutional Talk

People who have firsthand experience, compared with those who are not involved with abuse, are also more likely to seek out "professionals" or "experts" who can help them understand domestic violence. Though not all victims are exposed to this institutional talk, at least those who seek help at some point are likely to hear claims and narratives about the social problem. These options can help them in making sense of their own experiences, but the added narratives can also help complicate the problem.

Being exposed to institutional talk is an important process in victims doing interpretive work of their own experiences that may lead them to identify themselves as victims. Institutional talk is also influential in making connections between their troubled selves and the larger social problem. As Loseke (2001) explained, not all victims readily (or ever) accept the formula stories and narratives produced through institutional talk. However, some victims do use institutional discourse to help construct their troubled self narrative. Linda describes this process. She said that it is all about identification. "When somebody who's going to be a legal advocate for you is going to pin point the various points she's going to bring up to identify [the abuse], you realize that was actually happening." She said that before talking to counselors, advocates, or groups like Al Anon, "you always think your problem is unique and entirely different from what you read about. It doesn't become personally aligned with your situation until you talk to other people who then you understand that they went through the same thing." The change from seeing one's own situation as being unique to identifying it as part of a larger problem is important for victims to begin connecting to the larger social problem. By no means is this a simple or clear-cut process. Nor is it the same for all victims. We use Linda's case as an example of how people and institutions introduced other narratives for her and how she incorporated them into her own identity.

Linda said that her main sources of information were the counselors and advocate. They helped her recognize the abuse in her own relationship and led her to believe that she was a victim.

For me, at the time it was occurring, for me it wasn't really classified as domestic violence. It was more—it wasn't violence—well my husband had an alcohol problem so that was the instigator and it wasn't really his desire to do this kind of activity. So you make all kinds of excuses. And probably in a lot of cases alcohol is a factor. I eventually sought an order of protection through the women's organization. It was an advocate that worked with that organization that helped me go through the court process to

get the order of protection. To interview with her and saying I was being kept up, being harassed through the night and not being able to sleep, I never considered that a form of violence. To me that was just his problem and it wasn't really mine. But afterwards realizing that I've been deprived of sleep and I hadn't really thought of it that way. It's identification. Before that it's sort of vague as to just exactly what the term means. When somebody who's going to be a legal advocate for you is going to pinpoint the various points she's going to bring up to identify it, you realize that was actually happening. So that was probably the first time I really believed that I was a victim.

Linda also talked about how a counselor helped her see that low self-esteem was part of the problem. She did not consider this before talking to the counselor. Again, this is an example of someone else identifying the problem for her.

I also went to alcoholic spouse counseling. I went to a counselor and talked one-to-one about the problem. She brought out how it was involved with your feelings of low self-esteem. I hadn't thought about that at all.

Linda said that a minister helped her see that she had a good reason to get out of her relationship. Linda seemed to be able to see her situation in a different light after talking to an "outsider."

I also talked to my minister about it. It's good to have an outside perspective because when you're involved with it, it's just different. That he had threatened me with a gun—he didn't exactly point it at me and say he was going to shoot me—but he did fire it in the house. The minister said if anybody would have done that, that is more than enough reason to get out. I didn't really take it that drastically. But when you look back at it I think, oh, my gosh. It's subtle. The fear and the enormity of the problem as it develops. It's very subtle. I didn't really feel all that threatened. That really I could take care of myself but I wasn't doing it.

It is significant to note that all of the people in this study who had firsthand experience with abuse sought help at one time. That help ranged from legal advocates to ministers. It is quite possible that people who have firsthand experience but have not sought help or who may not tell people about their abuse would not have these sources of information. It is often difficult to "find" those who are abused but do not disclose it or seek help. In seeking help, these individuals had opportunities to interpret their experiences with abuse through other people. This interpretation, and at times validation, of their experiences contributes to their understanding of domestic violence.

Questioning Cultural Scripts for Why Victims Stay

The question, "Why do victims stay?" has been dominant in both social science literature as well as popular discourse (Loseke & Cahill, 1984). Arguing that leaving

abusive partners is the best thing for victims has been a dominant part of battered women's advocacy and public opinion (Baker, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Loseke, 1992; Loseke & Cahill, 1984). The battered women's movement has worked hard to educate the public about victims of domestic violence. In part, this education has shifted attitudes about victims. There is more sympathy and understanding for victims today than there was just 15 years ago, when studies showed more explicit victim-blaming attitudes (Dodge & Greene, 1991; Hilton, 1993; Schuller & Vidmar, 1992). Instead, more people are able to explain why it may be hard for a victim to leave the abusive relationship. However, the victim is still being held responsible for the problem, even if there is a greater understanding of what the victim goes through. Even when people have more "understanding" about why it is hard to leave, victims are still expected to take responsibility for leaving (Florida Department of Corrections, 1999; Klein et al., 1997; Safe Rhode Island, 1997). We argue that the cultural narrative about victims includes an "understanding" of why it is hard to leave and yet a belief that victims need to leave and that there are adequate resources available.

Those who had firsthand experience with abuse do not provide the clear, robust narrative for why victims stay as nonvictims did. Though there are glimpses of "formula stories" in the victims' narratives, there are also many examples of questions and challenges to the cultural scripts. Parts of their explanations reflect a more complex understanding of the problem than just blaming the victims. Furthermore, other studies show that victims have a greater awareness of the social and cultural factors involved compared with those who only rely on the media. For example, abused women are more likely to believe that factors such as a man's desire to control women, people accepting violence toward woman as normal, people not offering to help abused women, and cultural norms tolerating family violence are major contributors to domestic violence (Nabi & Horner, 2001). In short, their lived experience challenges the simplicity of the formula stories and complicates their task of trying to explain the "social problem" because they are also trying to explain their troubled self.

Baker (1997) found that battered women often tried to follow the cultural script for leaving their abuser but ran into inadequate social and institutional support. "The complexity and difficulties of individual battered women's lives were not acknowledged" in the cultural script of why women stay and why they should leave. This study also found victims resisting the "simple understandings" for why victims stay. People with firsthand experience with domestic violence contemplate the complexity of why victims stay in abusive relationships. This is more profound for those who have experienced abuse as an adult. When trying to construct a narrative that explains your firsthand experiences, it appears to be much harder to construct a narrative that "makes sense."

Gina often expresses wonder about why victims stay in abusive relationships even though she had experienced several herself. She wonders, "Why does it take so long for people to get out? It's kind of sad that people get so sad and desperate that they cling to little nuggets of goodness." The topic of "why victims stay" came up at other

points in the interview. Gina said that many of her conversations with friends who had also experienced abuse focused on why they stayed in the relationship.

I think the conversations with friends have been telling war stories—personal stories or this happened to my friend kind of thing. There was a lot of “How the hell could we have been so stupid?” “I can’t believe I stayed in this relationship for two and a half years and it took until getting to this point before I got out.”

Gina’s focus on her own victimization came through in her description of her first abusive relationship. Gina said that as far as she knew, she was the only woman whom her first boyfriend abused. Also, when asked what she thought caused domestic violence, Gina turned the question into a focus on the victims: “Hard to tell. In some ways that’s like, ‘What causes some people to be victims?’ Who knows? Maybe it’s fate.”

Like Gina, the other individuals who had experienced abuse in an adult relationship discussed how they still could not understand why it takes so long for victims to leave the abusive relationship. Randy said that when he thought about his first marriage, in which his wife was abusive, he wondered why he stayed for so many years. He said, “I should have ended my marriage on the honeymoon. It just got off to a bad start. I wonder why people stay in situations where they’re not happy.”

Although Barbara wonders why “men do it”—referring to abusing others—she also continues to wonder “why women let men do it.”

I don’t understand why women let men do it to them and I don’t understand why men find it necessary to do it. I just can’t understand that. I have a brother-in-law who married his second wife. She was a very assertive woman. Put together. She knew what she was doing, knew where she was going or so it seemed to me. I saw her at my daughter’s wedding and they’d been married for at least ten years now. She was a mouse. She had turned into this person who just didn’t have the self confidence anymore. I was so shocked. And it was my brother-in-law who did it to her. And she let him.

Linda talked about a neighbor she knew who was in an abusive relationship. She thought it was odd that this woman would endure the abuse. When asked if she still thought it was odd that the neighbor stayed after she herself had experienced abuse, she said, “I still thought less of this neighbor for having gone through it than I would have if I thought she didn’t endure it. Somehow there was a criticism within me of her because she did submit herself to that.”

Those individuals who were victims of abuse as children, but not as adults, did not express the same type of questions about why victims stay. Part of this may be that though they draw from their victimization to explain the problem, they separated the problem from their selves more than those who were victims in adult relationships. This would make sense if they saw “domestic violence” as more specifically defined as adult relationships. Therefore, they were constructing narratives of the “problem” more than their selves.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is not our purpose to discuss which process of understanding social problems results in a more “accurate” picture of the problem. We do not mean to suggest that either the victims or the nonvictims necessarily have the better grasp on the problem. They are seeing the problem from different angles and through different processes of evaluation. There will always be different routes for understanding domestic violence because we will always have some people who are victims and others who are not.

When discussing people who rely on the media, one might argue that the media’s impact does increase people’s understanding of the problem. A significant claims-maker in shaping the official reality of domestic violence is the battered women’s movement. This movement has helped spread the “reasons” why victims have trouble leaving abusive relationships. Most individuals who used the media as a main source of information are able to repeat these reasons, including financial problems, love, guilt, threats, and no social support. Studies show that there is more sympathy and understanding for victims today than there was just 15 years ago. Though there are still individuals and media stories that have more explicitly victim-blaming portrayals, overall the public has more information about victims of abuse (Berns, 2004; Hilton, 1993; Klein et al., 1997). It is likely that increased media coverage has aided in this rise in public awareness of victims. However, the public continues to focus on the individual level of abuse and typically ignores the abuser’s role and the social and cultural contexts of abuse. Public opinion research shows that victims are more likely to raise issues of social and cultural problems (Nabi & Horner, 2001). However, the narrative put forth by nonvictims does not seem to capture the complexity of the problem. Though people with firsthand experience did not have the neatly packaged explanations of why victims stay, their questions and comments perhaps better reflect the complexity of abusive relationships.

Our study supports other scholars’ arguments that lived experience, such as being a victim of a social problem, is not easily understood and can be both ambiguous and complex, whereas media discourse about social problems contains more easily categorized experiences and less confusing frames for explaining social problems (Berns, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Lempert, 1996b, 1997; Loseke, 2001; Schlesinger et al., 1992). This research on the process of evaluating claims and constructing different narratives of the self and the social problem helps to explain the differences between victims’ and nonvictims’ understandings of social issues. Having a troubled self that is intertwined with a social problem makes it harder to make sense of that problem. If those who have a more limited exposure to a range of experiences and claims about a problem are able to construct a more robust narrative, it may be that they are more confident and aggressive in forwarding their particular perspective. If those who are involved with a social problem as victims have a harder time constructing a narrative of that problem, then they may be less likely to develop a claim that is simple and clear and able to be disseminated and understood by others.

It is important to question the frames and the “understanding” that emerge with any “successful” social problems claims-making. It is not news that mass media depictions of domestic violence frequently do not grasp the complexity of the problem. This study raises the concern and the call for more research to question how the robustness of nonvictims’ understanding of social problems progressively marginalizes the victims’ understanding of the problem. Because the media are more likely to embrace the simple frames, one may reason that the more complex frames are less likely to be heard. Therefore, it is possible that those people with firsthand experience have a harder time getting their perspectives heard. We highlight three concerns that our study helps illustrate regarding the finding that the simpler frames are embraced more readily than the more complex stories that come from lived experience.

First, victims may be caught between having to accept simplified narratives that do not capture their lived experience to get the help they need or, having to refuse to accept the cultural scripts, leaving them feeling isolated and alone. Advocacy frames and/or entertainment media frames that use simplified and dramatic stories to capture people’s attention may increase the awareness for nonvictims, but they also risk alienating or not connecting to victims. Stories that capture the confusion and complexity of lived experience might be more effective in reaching people involved in the problem and in educating those not directly involved with the problem.

A second concern is that the simpler frames for understanding social problems help shape rigid and narrow solutions that ignore the complexity of the problem. Because formula stories are relied on to describe the problem, dominant solutions tend to only reflect the more extreme aspects found in the formula stories (Loseke, 2003). As illustrated in this research and many other studies, for domestic violence these formula stories have shaped narrow solutions that focus on the victim’s responsibility for solving the problem (Baker, 1997; Berns, 2004; Loseke, 1992). Another social problem that illustrates this concern is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD has become a dominant frame for explaining childhood behavior that historically may have been viewed as “normal.” Now the simplified frames of ADHD call for drugs as the main solution for this problem (Conrad & Potter, 2000; Rafalovich, 2004).

Finally, as social problems become “understood,” the complexity of the problems are no longer discussed, policies are less likely to be improved because we “know” what to do, and less attention and awareness are built because we “now understand” that issue. In the first author’s research, an example of this is illustrated by the finding that popular women’s magazines published more comprehensive articles on domestic violence in the 1970s because it was a “new” topic. Once domestic violence became a “known issue,” magazine editors discouraged comprehensive articles on the topic in favor of the more dramatic personal accounts of the problem (Berns, 2004). Returning to ADHD as another example, now that we “know” about this problem, it is harder for people to challenge the dominant frames of ADHD and raise awareness about alternative explanations and solutions.

This study furthers our understanding of how firsthand experience affects how people select and evaluate claims about and experiences with social problems. By comparing victims and nonvictims of domestic violence, we can better understand why these individuals construct different narratives of the problem. Further research into this area of inquiry can help us in understanding the process of understanding social problems. We can learn from this research how to frame claims about social problems that go through media, and how to work with victims who are simultaneously trying to understand the social problem as well as their selves.

Notes

1. Because most faculty and researchers have doctoral degrees, we selected participants from the nonacademic staff to reach a more diverse range of educational backgrounds. It also happened that the sample was fairly split between men and women and victims and nonvictims. This was not an intentional distribution but rather happened as a part of the random selection. It is likely that among those who said no to the request to participate were some who did so because they were victims. This is a problem with all research in the area of intimate social problems.

2. In doing the interviews for this research, we did not set out to compare victims of abuse with those who had no firsthand experience with abuse. However, in listening to the individuals discuss how they have come to understand domestic violence, it became clear that the differences in general types of experience shaped how they used the media and how they talked about the problem.

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